

EMBRACING THE DIGITAL FRONTIER: EQUIPPING  
THE LOCAL CHURCH TO CULTIVATE  
ONLINE FRESH EXPRESSIONS

Aaron B. Kesson

Bachelor of Arts, Spring Arbor University, 2003  
Master of Arts, Spring Arbor University, 2006  
MDiv, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2011

Mentor

Michael Beck, DMin

A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO  
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
Dayton, Ohio  
May 2023



## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	vii
ABBREVIATIONS .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
1.    MINISTRY FOCUS .....	5
2.    BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	24
3.    HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS .....	43
4.    THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	61
5.    INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS.....	75
6.    PROJECT ANALYSIS.....	87
APPENDIX	
A.    WORKSHOP SLIDES.....	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	125

## **ABSTRACT**

### **EMBRACING THE DIGITAL FRONTIER: EQUIPPING THE LOCAL CHURCH TO CULTIVATE ONLINE FRESH EXPRESSIONS**

by  
Aaron B. Kesson  
United Theological Seminary, 2023

Mentor

Michael Beck, DMin

This project's context is the Durand First United Methodist Church in Durand, Michigan. The problem is that the congregation struggles to embrace digital space as valid for ministry, resulting in missed opportunities to reach unchurched people. This dissertation's hypothesis proposes that if members and leaders learn about and embrace digitality, they will be equipped to cultivate online fresh expressions that build meaningful relationships with unchurched people in digital space. This project utilized workshops to introduce and teach participants about digitality and online fresh expressions. Qualitative analysis was performed, utilizing pre and post-workshop questionnaires, group discussions, and focused personal interviews.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my mentors, Dr. Michael Beck and Dr. Rosario Picardo for their unwavering support and guidance throughout my doctoral journey. Their knowledge and experience of fresh expressions brought depth and perspective to my research, while their love for the church and the mission of reaching people with the gospel sustained my focus and reminded me of the Kingdom impact my project can elicit. For my loving wife, Maria who gave so selflessly over the last three years, my children Andrew and Josh who watched me stay up late at night working to complete this project. And to the people of the Durand First United Methodist Church for your support and prayers while I completed this project.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the glory of God and to the many expressions of church as Jesus followers explore ministry in the new frontier. And, to my grandfather who encouraged me to continue sharing the gospel with passion and love. For Christ and His Kingdom.

## **ILLUSTRATIONS**

### **Figures**

1	Impression & Experience of Online Fresh Expressions .....	108
2	Change in Understanding of Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions .....	110
3	Responses for Adequate Training to Lead Online Fresh Expressions.....	111
4	Responses to Leading Online Fresh Expressions Post-Workshop .....	112

### **Tables**

1	Digital Native or Digital Immigrant? .....	106
---	--	-----

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

DFUMC	Durand First United Methodist Church
FX	Fresh Expressions
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
UMC	The United Methodist Church



## INTRODUCTION

The new missional frontier created by digitalization, combined with a cultural shift to an increasing embrace of digitality offers the local church an opportunity to share the gospel in ways that lead to forming Christian community in non-traditional spaces.<sup>1</sup> This new missional frontier is a space that requires the church to approach with an incarnational posture that stresses an openness to allowing the frontier to speak for itself.<sup>2</sup> The Durand First United Methodist Church experiences challenges in adapting to the reality of digitality and online space as a meaningful setting for ministry. The hypothesis for this project is if members and leaders learn about and embrace digitality, they will be equipped to cultivate online fresh expressions that build meaningful relationships with unchurched people in digital space.<sup>3</sup> The foundation of these relationships will lead to increased opportunity for ministry and sharing the love of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Digitalization is understood as “a long and constant process in which all domains of societal activities- are concerned and reconfigured by it [digitalization].” Eric George, *Digitalization of Society and Socio-Political Issues 1: Digital, Communication, and Culture*. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2020. Accessed October 7, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central; According to Kurlberg and Phillips, digitality is understood as “... the very social matrix in which it [digitality] takes place and therefore adopts its symbolic economy.” *Missio Dei in a Digital Age* (London, UK: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2020), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Adam Beck and Rosario Picardo, *Fresh Expressions in a Digital Age: How the Church Can Prepare for A Post-Pandemic World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Fresh expressions are defined as “a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church.” Michael Adam Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2019), 10.

The natural propensity for American culture to readily embrace technology and digitization while the local church hesitates and struggles to see the possibilities, deepens the divide among churched and unchurched persons. This division of churched and unchurched is further exacerbated as technology continues to develop and chart new courses while methods of evangelism primarily employed by the local church fail to leverage the use of technology to effectively connect with the unchurched. This hesitation to adapt contributes to an increasing number of digital natives who are further disconnected and disengaged from meaningful ministry offered through the local church.<sup>4</sup>

The people of Durand First United Methodist Church desire to reach unchurched people, yet in an ever-changing world, the tools and methods to do so seem out of reach or unattainable without a large budget, pools of volunteers, or tech-savvy leadership. Learning to embrace digitality and online space as valid for the practice of ministry will foster meaningful connection with unchurched people as the church engages through online fresh expressions. The goal of this project is to equip participants to embrace digitality as a foundation for cultivating online fresh expressions. Through the course of participating in five workshop sessions, and individual interviews, participants will gain understanding and confidence to cultivate and lead online fresh expressions.

Each chapter of this dissertation is a building block, establishing a foundation for the primary teaching material of the final project. The first chapter provides an overview of the context and ministry practices of Durand First United Methodist Church, primarily regarding experiences with fresh expressions and building meaningful connection with

---

<sup>4</sup> As definitions of “digital natives” vary among researchers, I will refer to digital natives utilizing the working definition proposed by Marc Prensky - “‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet.” Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.” *On the Horizon* 9, no 5 (October, 2001): pp 1-6, 1.

unchurched people. Additionally, chapter one encapsulates segments of my faith journey and how my spiritual formation links with the experiences of the congregants at DFUMC.

Chapter two develops a biblical foundation, exploring the experience of the early church in Acts 11:19-30. As people are changed by God's Spirit and subsequently become proclaimers of the gospel themselves, the wild branches of God's transformative power emerge to enable Spirit-led ministry with new people in new places. The church in Jerusalem, upon hearing of the things happening in Antioch sends Barnabas to report on the developments, leading to a blended ecology approach that facilitates the expansion of the spread of the gospel.<sup>5</sup> Participants in this workshop session learn about ways in which the local church can reach into online space, much like the believers in Antioch.

Chapter three explores John Wesley and the early Methodist movement, providing a historical foundation for approaching digitality and online fresh expressions. In this chapter, the Methodist movement gives rise to innovative practices that form Christian community and facilitate opportunities for people to respond to the gospel. Linking the ministry of the Methodist class meeting with Wesley's field preaching, the chapter develops a foundation for exploration into a deeper understanding of innovative ministry practices that reach people outside the walls of the inherited church.

In chapter four, Lesslie Newbigin's approach to the apostolic mission of the church is examined as a theological lens for understanding the intersection of a life transformed by Jesus and everyday relationships. Developing the idea of missional theology as a foundation for online fresh expressions provides a framework for

---

<sup>5</sup> The blended ecology is defined by Michael Beck as "...fresh expressions of church in symbiotic relationship with inherited forms of church in such a way that the combining of these modes over time merge to create a nascent form." Michael Adam Beck, and Jorge Acevedo, *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), Location 321, Kindle E-Book.

approaching ministry in the digital frontier as relationships are cultivated through Jesus-centered intentionality. Reaching beyond traditional understandings of space and leveraging that space in the digital frontier enables participants to embrace relationships that grow beyond physical and cultural boundaries.

Social theory and the broader work of sociology comprise the foundational framework for chapter five as an interdisciplinary foundation for understanding digitality and online fresh expressions. The work of Manuel Castells is explored as are his theories of the network society and the space of flows. Connecting the challenge faced by the local church to embrace digitality with the work of Castells provides a way to relate the previously explored foundations chapters with a social theory that both challenges and strengthens ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, the sixth chapter explores the planning, development, and implementation of the culminating project, along with an assessment of data and considerations for future research. While all participants indicated a positive change in their understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions, the data suggests that there is still much to be explored when it comes to equipping the local church to cultivate online fresh expressions. The hope is that future researchers, local church pastors, and leaders will utilize this data to formulate approaches and training that equip the local church to reach into digital space more effectively.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **MINISTRY FOCUS**

#### *Introduction*

The desire to connect people with Jesus and with other followers of Jesus is a central theme of my ministry. In the contexts of local church ministry and that of Army chaplaincy, I have discovered the importance of relational processes as a foundation to the intentional development of faith formation in the lives of others. Shared practices of faith enable us to meet people where they are, much like the class meetings of early Methodism. In our network-connected society, more people than ever are online and an opportunity exists for the church to reach into that digital space to invite people into relationship with Jesus and form fresh expressions of church. However, the church is hesitant to embrace the idea of digital spaces a valid means of experiencing true connectedness with others. It is my goal to explore the effectiveness of a deepened understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions that empowers the local church to cultivate ministry in online spaces.

#### *Context*

The Durand First United Methodist Church is known for its care and concern for the community through acts of generosity and hospitality, opening its doors for community groups, fundraising dinners, and local philanthropic organizations. Upon my

arrival to DFUMC in July 2017 I observed that, due to space concerns at the local schools, over 300 students were utilizing the church gym space each week for sports practices.

Out of curiosity, I asked several members what they were doing to intentionally reach out to these students and their families as they entered the building and made use of the space. At the time, no concrete plan had been prepared, but the thought of making intentional contact by building relationship with these families intrigued the members. In an effort to move the congregation toward a relationship driven model of ministry, I encouraged leadership to explore ways upon which to build ministry centered on relationships.

The process of transitioning toward a relationship driven ministry began as the trustees reworked the building use policy to reflect a more hospitable approach to those utilizing the building. Rather than require what previously was referred to as a building supervisor, a role of hospitality host was created in its place and the focus changed from supervision to that of creating spaces of generous hospitality and welcome. The change from a mentality of protecting the building to a mentality of hospitality in sharing the gifts God has entrusted to the members of DFUMC has led to further conversations on what it means to be driven in mission through relationships.

In the spring of 2018, we engaged in a study on making meaningful connections with people outside the church. The small group that met on Wednesday evenings gathered for prayer, conversation and holy mischief as we sought out ways to live our core values as a congregation. The book, *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships* served as our central text for study and reflection.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of six weeks, we explored the themes of hospitality and generosity as core values

---

<sup>1</sup> Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 3.

to drive our ministries. During our time together, we found ourselves reflecting upon the statement that “people crave connection and momentum.”<sup>2</sup> From here, we were thrust into a time of discerning where God was leading us to act. Finally, it was decided that the church needed a space where people could comfortably join with others and share their story of faith. So, after a few meetings with the leadership team and trustees, we began conversation and took action to transform the seldom used parlor into a place of connection and relationship-building as it became a café.

Although it took about six months before the whole congregation gave in to the idea of a café, the ministry effectiveness of the newly renovated space was already shown to be impactful. Combined with the effort to transform thinking about the building as a place to be protected to a place to be used for building relationships, the café soon became a center of hospitality for parents who would wait for their child to finish with their sports practice in the gym. A variety of teas, hot chocolate and coffee were made available, along with comfortable café-style seating and a cozy couch. As we upgraded our internet service, wireless internet was extended into the café for public use.

After inviting parents to stick around and make themselves at home while younger siblings enjoyed a juice box and snack, they would look back in a sense of bewilderment. On more than one occasion, I would reassure them that it wasn’t a church gimmick to get them to sit down and become a captive audience for an hour-long sermon. Upon hearing this, their demeanor lightened, and a sense of relief showed on their face. It was almost as if they had never been offered this kind of hospitality in a church before.

---

<sup>2</sup> Farr, Anderson, and Kotan, *Get Their Name*, 63.

It became clear that we were making a difference, simply by adding some paint and creating space for conversations to take place.

Today, the café continues to be a place of welcome and hospitality. Several of our small groups now meet in the café instead of the classroom and many parents have made it a regular practice to show up and wait for their child to finish their sports practice in the gym. Recently, our local Railroad Days Committee asked to hold their royalty judging contest in our café. The event provided an opportunity to serve the community and get the word out that hospitality and generosity are two of our main goals as we connect people with the love and life of Jesus Christ.

Building upon the success of creating space for reinforcing relationships and an emphasis on hospitality as a core value, I met with our newly appointed lay leader to discuss opportunities to further our reach into the community. Over several months, we discussed the importance of building relationships with people outside the church as a step in the process toward inviting them into discipleship as apprentices of Jesus. We also identified a deficit within the existing congregation when it comes to a clear, specified discipleship plan. Our discovery led us to recognize that intentional, focused efforts toward discipleship must be a priority if we are to engage the wider community in becoming disciples of Jesus.

Our newly discovered area of focus curved our conversations toward the important role of classes and bands in the history of Methodism. Intrigued by a rediscovery of our roots in reinforcing relationships through classes and bands, we began



reading Dr. Kevin Watson's book *The Class Meeting* <sup>3</sup> and immediately decided to begin a class meeting of our own. Our first eight weeks were spent walking through Dr. Watson's book and engaging in conversation centered upon the role and implementation of class meetings as a vital part of Christian discipleship. We quickly discovered that in our conversations and sharing with others who were not yet part of a class meeting we unearthed a desire to experience transformation in a relationship-centered small group. It was at this point that we dedicated ourselves to making participation in class meetings a priority for the discipleship process, in alignment with Dr. Watson's understanding of the class meeting as a small group "...primarily focused on transformation and not information, where people learn how to interpret their entire lives through the lens of the gospel, build a vocabulary for giving voice to their experience of God, and grow in faith in Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Durand is a small Michigan city in Shiawassee County, with a population of 3,279. Nestled about 20 miles from Flint to the East and 40 miles from Lansing to the West, Durand is best known as a bedroom community. The percentage of blue collar to white collar workers is split in half, with white collar workers comprising a slim majority at 51.1%. Since the year 2000, the population in Durand has experienced a steady decline, taking the biggest hit in 2009 after the 2008 recession. Population data in 2010 reflected a 14.2% decrease over the year 2000. Since 2010, census data indicates an average of 2.4% decline every 10 years, projected to 2029.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Exercise* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> "QuickInsite Report," MissionInsite, 48429 Zip Code, <http://www.missioninsite.com/>.

Membership and attendance data for DFUMC reflects a similar, and more significant decrease over time since the year 2007. Since that time membership has steadily decreased, fluctuating at times from 258 in 2007 down to 128 in 2018 and experiencing the greatest decrease of 19% from 2007 to 2008. Interestingly, worship attendance, while also decreasing over time does not mirror overall membership increases or decreases.<sup>6</sup> As of year ending 2019, worship attendance is at 77 and overall membership is at 128.<sup>7</sup>

A significant contrast between median household income levels in Shiawassee County and nearby Genesee County exists. For Shiawassee County, median household income is \$54,742 while Genesee County median household income is around \$7,000 less at \$47,006. Additionally, contrasts in poverty level exists as a difference of 8%, reported higher in Genesee County.<sup>8</sup> Specifically within the 48429 zip code, the median household income is \$40,462, indicating that families within the context of this study area are below average household income trends in relation to the state and county as a whole. The percentage of families below the poverty line in the study area comprise 15.3% of the population, compared to 10.5% of the state population. Regarding racial and ethnic diversity, the study area is generally homogenous, with 95.1% of the

---

<sup>6</sup> “Membership and Attendance Durand First UMC,” UMDData, The General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church, <http://www.umddata.org/ChurchProfile.aspx?ChurchID=583845>.

<sup>7</sup> “Profile of the Church 2020,” Durand First United Methodist Church, 1.

<sup>8</sup> US Census Bureau, Quick Facts: Genesee County, Michigan, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/geneseecountymichigan,MI/PST045219>

population identified as White, while 2.1% are Hispanic or Latino and less than .1% are Black/African American.<sup>9</sup>

Levels of adult education attainment in the 48429 zip code compared to the state are consistent with the makeup of blue collar to white collar workers. Nearly 40% of the study area population is a high school graduate or possess a GED, while another 29% have attained some college education but without earning a degree. These two areas are above state averages, while those with bachelor's and graduate or professional degrees are significantly below state averages.<sup>10</sup> The findings of the study area are consistent with the membership of DFUMC regarding adult education attainment levels.

Another area of significance is family structure and households with children. Compared with the state, the greater Durand area has fewer married-couple households as well as single father households with children. However, single mother households are almost 20% greater in the study area than the state and are projected to increase by 21.4% by the year 2024.<sup>11</sup> Within the membership of DFUMC, the majority of households are married without children while households with children are generally married couples.

The top two Mosaic segments as identified by Experian in their MissionInsite report are referred to as Autumn Years – Settled and Sensible, making up 23.5% of the population and Families in Motion – Diapers and Debit Cards, comprising another 12.9% of the population.<sup>12</sup> According to the research of Experian, the Settled and Sensible segment group is generally close to or at retirement age, predominantly white with high

---

<sup>9</sup> “QuickInsite Report,” MissionInsite, 48429 Zip Code.

<sup>10</sup> “QuickInsite Report,” MissionInsite, 48429 Zip Code.

<sup>11</sup> “QuickInsite Report,” MissionInsite, 48429 Zip Code.

<sup>12</sup> “QuickInsite Report,” MissionInsite, 48429 Zip Code.

school education and earn mid-scale wages from their work in the skilled trades.<sup>13</sup> The Diapers and Debit Cards segment are described as being households with adults generally under 35 years old, predominantly white and raising young children while earning lower middle-class incomes. Many of these families are starting out on their own or are headed by single parents who are restarting after a divorce. Both segments are relatively comfortable embracing technology, while Diapers and Debit Cards are reportedly more comfortable with newer forms of technology.<sup>14</sup> The data provided by Experian matches closely with the segments most representative of the members at DFUMC. Overall, members seem to be relatively comfortable with embracing technology and demonstrate a general adaptability to changing circumstances and environments.

Regarding religiosity and spiritual beliefs, the data demonstrates a generally positive disposition toward God and religious practice. In the study area, 40.5% of respondents indicated strong agreement with the statement, “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” Similarly, 36.8% strongly agreed with the statement, “I have a personal relationship with one living God, who is Lord and Savior.” These percentages are in agreement with projected percentages of those who are involved in a religious congregation or community, which are reported at 38.5%. However, this also suggests that 61.6% are projected to not be involved in a religious congregation or community.<sup>15</sup> Priority rankings of reasons for recommending ministries or programs

---

<sup>13</sup> Experian Marketing Services, *Mosaic USA Group and Segment Descriptions* (Version 2, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Experian Marketing Services, *Mosaic USA E-Handbook: The Consumer Classification of the United States of America*, (2016).

<sup>15</sup> MissionInsite, *The ReligiousInsite Report 2017*, Geography:Cities-Durand, MI.

demonstrate a strong preference for warm and friendly encounters, with sermon quality and adult social activities coming in at a distant second and third.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that religion plays a primary role in shaping social morality is a statement agreed upon by 50% of respondents, while 27.3% disagreed with that statement. A difference of 22.7 points. The distance between agreement and disagreement on this statement is significantly more pronounced in the study area than it is in the general population of the United States, which is only 10.6 points. An area where local responses are more congruent with the national average deals with attitudes on giving more attention to accomplishing economic justice. The study area reports 57.1% in agreement with the statement, which is comparable to 58.3% across the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Given the data that suggests a spiritual openness from the wider community and willingness to venture into new, uncharted areas of ministry for the people of DFUMC, it seems that an opportunity exists to extend the reach of ministry by means of intentional, relational discipleship processes such as class meetings and incorporating fresh expressions of church that bring revitalization to a changing landscape. The data also supports a newly revived focus on reaching out through unconventional means, such as social media and live streaming platforms. The increasing expanse of the digital frontier is on the doorstep of DFUMC.

---

<sup>16</sup> MissionInsite, *The MinistryInsite Report 2017*, Geography:Cities-Durand, MI.

<sup>17</sup> MissionInsite, *The ReligiousInsite Report 2017*, Geography:Cities-Durand, MI.

*Ministry Journey*

Foundational to my faith in Jesus Christ are the essential principles of a living faith as understood in the life and ministry of John Wesley. I have grown over time to appreciate and dive more deeply into my faith as a Methodist, recognizing that the central component of an active faith is a reliance upon God through an experience of the means of grace. The Christian faith is meant to be lived in community, expressed not only in what we may think of when we think of church, but in our everyday lives. I am drawn to the ways in which God does his work in the lives of common, ordinary people in the midst of everyday challenges, successes, failures and victories. I am especially aware of God's working through those who color outside the lines, in places the church has not been able to reach through traditional means. In this way, I think about the ministry of Wesley and his realization that the church is both the redeemed and redeeming presence of God on earth.

Throughout my life, I have been honored to practice meaningful relationships with many people through whom I have experienced the redeeming presence of God. As my spiritual journey carries on, the more I recognize the importance of relationships and that ministry itself is really centered upon relationship with God and others. Over the past five years or so, I have become more intentional about the sacredness of these relationships. From my family and close friends, to acquaintances and colleagues I have learned to cultivate and commit to developing these relationships further as a sacred, devotional practice. Within the context of the church where I now serve as pastor, I am thrilled to see the ways in which God's Spirit moves in the hearts of men and women

through reemergence of the Methodist class meeting as it takes root and prominence as a vital Christian discipline.

Over the past three years, I have met weekly with a group of three other men to discuss our lives in Christ, our struggles, successes, and confession of sin. Known as a discipleship band, we place high priority on our meeting together and work our schedules around this important time each week. For me, this time together on Thursdays at 11am is a sounding board, a confessional booth, a safe place for encouragement and direction, and allows for deep heart work within my soul. Some weeks I look forward to Thursday as a time to share where God has been working in my life and where I have met God along the way. At the same time, there are weeks that I dread Thursday as I know there will be accountability for unconfessed sin. Yet, even in these times of conviction and confession, God's Spirit fans the flame of grace and peace as my brothers join their spirits with mine in proclaiming "In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven."

The power of this potent proclamation took on an even deeper meaning for me as I entered the world of extension ministries as a United Methodist endorsed Army Reserve Chaplain. I am especially thankful for this call to extension ministry, serving as a missionary and extending the ministry of my local church to reach Soldiers and their families in proclaiming the love of Jesus. The ministry of military chaplaincy has broadened my awareness of God's presence and work in the world beyond traditional expressions of church. In many ways, my work in the local church has been strengthened as I minister with, serve beside and learn among Soldiers and leaders in the Army. In the same way, my ministry as a chaplain is strengthened and supported through the work and life in ministry and relationship with the local church and surrounding community.

Practically speaking, extending God's Table on the back of a Humvee and baptizing a Soldier while in the field bring depth to my understanding and reach of the Sacraments as means of God's grace. The beauty of serving simultaneously in the local church and Army Chaplaincy is the realization that both ministry settings require the support and success of the other. This both/and understanding of ministry enables me to remain flexible and open to God's Spirit in a variety of settings.

My 17 years as a local church pastor in the United Methodist Church, combined with several years of working in mental health and more recently, my work as an Army Chaplain have also enabled me to recognize and develop other important areas of my life. As I have experienced a variety of cultures, expressions of faith both within and outside Christianity, and have walked with people in the throngs of hurt and pain, I have come to recognize the need for my own healing. I've heard it said that wounded people wound people. This pithy phrase has ruminated in my heart for years as I have attempted to remain as healthy as possible in dealing with my own brokenness as I come beside others. Fortunately, my professional counseling experience has aided my understanding in recognizing and addressing my own brokenness, not only in a clinical sense but in a practical, life-giving sense as I've sought counseling for myself. In the process, I've come to recognize that just as wounded people wound people, healed people can heal people. It is through my own experiences of healing through positive, healthy relationships with others that I've come to realize the great truth found in Henri Nouwen's words, "...since God has become man, it is man who has the power to lead his fellow man to freedom."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1974). 71.



### *Synergy*

As I continue to grow in my faith, deepen my understanding of God's presence through relationships, and focus more intently on the interconnectedness of ministry as it takes place both inside and outside the walls of the established church, I am reminded of my place as an innovator and teacher in the process. I have discovered that my dual role as a pastor and chaplain afford me opportunities to engage in a myriad of relationships that broaden my experience of ministry in multiple contexts. These contexts allow me to build relationships with people who are not yet followers of Jesus, while teaching and leading those who are already apprentices to reach out through innovative and fresh ways.

The work of intentional relationship development in the discipleship process is a vital part of bridging the gap between those already being apprenticed by Jesus and those who do not yet recognize their place in the apprenticeship journey. Along the way, I have discovered that in our post-Christendom culture, there exists a disconnect between the established church and people outside the church. Dr. Michael Beck and Rev. Jorge Acevedo, in their book *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, acknowledge this reality as both a challenge and a joy, as "Emerging generations don't speak 'Christianese' and typically have no life experience in the church... we must learn to translate our practices into the emerging language of 'plain words for plain people.'"<sup>19</sup> For me, the joy is found in relating to people in the places they already find themselves, and helping them to recognize the presence of God in that place. It is a freeing experience to embrace the reality that we do not need to perform spiritual acrobatics in order to experience the

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael Adam Beck, and Jorge Acevedo, *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), Location 443, Kindle E-Book.

presence of God. Beck and Acevedo point out that as we recover our sense of practical divinity by becoming more comfortable with the both/and realities of our context, we reinforce the development of a theological foundation in the lives of others.<sup>20</sup> Enabling people to develop a theological foundation that serves to propel them into an experience of God's presence is a central goal of fresh expressions.

Shortly after beginning my ministry in Durand, I began hanging out at the local coffee shop as a way to be visible in the community and to support local business. It didn't take long before I had people from the church joining me on Wednesday mornings for "Coffee with the Pastor." Five years later, the Stomping Grounds Coffee shop is known as my "downtown office." Over the past five years, I've had the opportunity to engage in conversation with people from many walks of life. From church people to strangers who overhear conversation and decide to take a seat, I've heard stories of extraordinary faith as well as deep hopelessness in the midst of brokenness and despair. I've prayed with and for people experiencing pain and loss, celebrated the birth of children and grandchildren and been invited to officiate a funeral for a loved one. Simply put, I've gone where the people already are, meeting them there and engaging in life with them.

In our current context, we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic that has forced institutions, to include the local church, to embrace new methods of communicating and collaborating in an effort to reach people where they are. In the local church, conversations about the validity of online interactions have emerged as people express concern that without face-to-face interactions, we risk losing our sense of

---

<sup>20</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 443

connectedness. In fact, some would argue the paradox that as we are increasingly connected via technology, we are more disconnected than ever. Referring to the realities of an always on, hyper-connected network society, Beck and Acevedo recognize isolation, and a loss of connectedness as “...the great soul wound of our time.”<sup>21</sup> Compounding the challenges faced by the local church, Watson recognizes that many small groups in the local church are driven by information-based learning, which certainly give a good base of knowledge, but “...have no impact on the way group members actually live.”<sup>22</sup>

As we engage in the process of studying, exploring and implementing ministry in digital spaces, I hope to see a renewed vision of what it means to live as the embodiment of Jesus himself. My desire is to see the work of evangelism being shared among all the people in these groups and serving as an example for others to follow as we reclaim the reality of the biblical call to be the “priesthood of all believers.”<sup>23</sup> In the process, I hope to bring awareness to, and effectively avoid falling into the trap of believing it is the pastor’s job to grow the church. Beck and Acevedo correctly identify the danger of professional clergy taking on the work of evangelism on their own, referring to it as a “bankrupt concept,”<sup>24</sup> and as a result dismissing the work of the body of Christ.

In the fresh expressions movement, the work of pioneers, “people who are passionate about mission on the edges”<sup>25</sup> as lay preachers taps into their interests and

---

<sup>21</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 537

<sup>22</sup> Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> See 1 Peter 2:5 and Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>24</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 568.

<sup>25</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 670.

hobbies as sources of birthing new forms of church.<sup>26</sup> According to Moynagh, this process resembles much of the early church processes in laying a foundation for spiritual development as early Christian communities emphasized continued growth toward trust and love of God and neighbor.<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, the Methodist class meeting served as a place of nurture and intentional faith development where members knew one another, shared common aspects of their discipleship journey and prayed with one another. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this place of nurture and intentional faith development has expanded to the digital frontier.

The question then arises, how can the local church embrace and lead through new methods of connecting people, engaging in the work of transformation within a digital space? For my time on Wednesdays in the coffee shop, our “Coffee with the Pastor” has shifted to an online, streaming format where people are invited to join with their favorite morning beverage and engage in conversation based on a topic shared on social media prior to the gathering. Our existing class meeting small group has shifted entirely online, continuing to meet weekly and providing an opportunity to gather even when someone is out of town. The convenience of joining from wherever is certainly a plus, but even more important for our class meeting is the fact that we don’t have to miss a week because we’re out of town or fallen ill. For these areas of ministry, embracing the digital space has shown a great deal of effectiveness. In fact, entering the digital space with curiosity and a sense of mission has led these groups to grow, often with people who are not geographically located near the church.

---

<sup>26</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 568.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Moynagh and Philip Harrold, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 30.

Recently, the people of DFUMC have launched into an online fresh expression of church called Café Theology Online. Taking what we've learned through engagements with people in Coffee with the Pastor, integrating a more intentional approach with prepared questions and inviting lay persons to lead the sessions has led to an experience of increased digital connection. Taking a cue from the Methodist class meeting, we've also incorporated a "how is it with your soul" type of question each week. It is not uncommon to see in the comments feed that a person from Georgia, or a couple from Northern Michigan have joined us and are responding in real time to the questions being posed on screen and live through video. Additionally, we have received multiple prayer requests and questions about what our church believes about various theological and social issues. On the occasion that we are unable to hold Café Theology Online, our "audience" will message the church through Facebook or send an email of concern that they may have missed a gathering time. By participating in this ministry, I've heard people from our church express that they are appreciative of the conversations that take place there. We've even had a few that were hesitant to embrace the online space join in and declare that they were now experiencing connection in the digital space.

I propose that as we rediscover the effectiveness of incorporating methods of discipleship such as the class meeting to digital spaces, transformation through intentional faith development and relational discipleship practices will be developed. My expectation is that we will experience these digital spaces as incubators for fresh expressions of church in both online and in-person contexts. The methods by which these encounters will be experienced are based on the formation and development of authentic relationships. Whether in person or in an online space, the question "How is it

with your soul?” Or “How is your life with God?”<sup>28</sup> point to the sacredness of connection, no matter the distance.

In the process of exploring the effectiveness of incorporating relational discipleship practices that affect spiritual growth and transformation, I also seek to learn more about the intersection of fresh expressions as a movement in a post-modern world, reviving tried and true methods of discipleship found in historic Methodism, more specifically the impact of participating in classes and bands as Christian disciplines upon the wider church. Similarly, I desire to see whether Methodist class meetings and other relational discipleship practices can be replicated as effective ways of starting fresh expressions of church in multiple contexts, to include the first, second and third places of doing life.<sup>29</sup> The embrace of digitality and increased training that focuses on cultivating online fresh expressions empowers the local church to reach beyond its walls and reach people in places the church never thought possible.

### *Conclusion*

By examining attitudes and approaches to online fresh expressions, leaders and congregants will be motivated to embrace digitality as a valid space affecting spiritual transformation and serving as an incubator for new fresh expressions of church to be developed. The exploration of the class meeting as a model for relational discipleship will demonstrate one way of incorporating the inherited church with fresh expressions, both digitally and in person. As churches and leaders become increasingly aware of the

---

<sup>28</sup> Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Beck, *Deep Roots Wild Branches*, 49.

need for digitally based ministry opportunities, they recognize that there are often roadblocks to beginning online fresh expressions. The lack of resources, decreased technical expertise, and the anxiety of launching ministry in a new environment quickly sideline any effort to suggest digital space as valid for ministry. This is especially true of churches located in predominantly rural areas.

In our network-connected society, more people than ever are online, and an opportunity exists for the church to reach into that digital space to invite people into relationship with Jesus and form fresh expressions of church. However, the church is hesitant to embrace the idea of digital spaces as a valid means of experiencing true connectedness with others. The proposed project will hopefully demonstrate that online fresh expressions and the embrace of digitality are valid means of connecting with others in the digital frontier. Further, it is hoped that churches experience a renewed sense of mission and drive for reaching the unchurched through online fresh expressions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

*Acts 11:19-30*

<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.” <sup>27</sup> At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. <sup>29</sup> The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; <sup>30</sup> this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. <sup>1</sup>

#### *Introduction*

In the book of Acts, Luke traces the movement of Christianity as God’s Spirit motivates and empowers the early church to bear witness of Jesus “...in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). 11:19-30 highlights the

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989. Acts 11:19-30. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the NRSV.



spread of the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch of Syria,<sup>2</sup> leading to deepened understanding of God's providence as the scattered believers respond to the martyrdom of Stephen (7:54-60). The theme of God's providential scattering of the believers throughout the book of Acts demonstrates the importance of understanding the Holy Spirit as the empowering force responsible for the exponential growth of the early church, especially among Gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

The missional focus of Acts, as witnessed through the inclusion of Gentiles, points to God's work in preparing the church to expand and develop within the context of culture and formation of Christian community. In the narrative of the believers in Antioch, we see Gentiles persuaded to become followers of God with faith in Jesus as the story unfolds into Luke's understanding of the diaspora mission. Our understanding of this text for today will lead us to embrace more fully the formation of Christian community in contexts that stretch our typical understanding of where God's Spirit works to bring transformation.

### *Literary Observations*

While this pericope is often separated into two segments (Acts 11:19-27 and 11:28-30), including verses 28-30 is important to our current study as the believers in Jerusalem not only investigate what is happening in Antioch, but the believers in Antioch

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there are several references to Antioch throughout the book of Acts, sometimes referring to different locations with the same name. Gaventa and Pervo agree that while Luke does not differentiate Antioch of Syria from the other Antioch's in this pericope, the centrality and size of Antioch of Syria as the third largest city in the Roman world points to its mention in these verses. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Acts of the Apostles." Essay. In *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, edited by Victor Paul Furnish. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 200. Richard I. Pervo, "Acts 11:19-30, The Church Spreads to Antioch." Excursus: Syrian Antioch. In *Acts: A Commentary*, edited by Harold W. Attridge. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media Fortress Press, 2009. 291-292.

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts : An Exegetical Commentary : 3:1-14:28*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013. 1833. ProQuest Ebook Central.

identify with the believers in Jerusalem by offering financial aid in support of the famine experienced in Judea.<sup>4</sup> The important link between Gentile inclusion and corporate table fellowship with the Jewish believers is highlighted in the participation of the Antiochian believers with the mission headquartered in Jerusalem. Conversely, the Jerusalem church appears to have supported the Antioch church's inclusion of Gentiles in the life of the early Christian community. Lüdemann, as cited in Taylor's work reinforces this relationship:

... the Antioch church was firmly bonded to the Jerusalem church, while exercising considerable independence of thought and practice, particularly with regard to association between Jews and Gentiles unhindered by the requirements of the Mosaic ritual purity laws, and especially in waiving the requirement of circumcision for Gentile converts to Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Acts 11:19-12:25 is understood as the completion of an entire section, based on Luke's utilization of Mark 6 as a model for the text.<sup>6</sup> This aligns with Keener's observation that the text of 11:19-30 interrupts a larger narrative, where Peter takes up a considerable portion beginning in 9:32 and culminating in 12:24.<sup>7</sup> Further, Longenecker observes that a shift in character focus is evident as one reads through the book of Acts, discovering Petrine material interspersed throughout Acts 1-12 and Pauline material more prominent in Acts 13-28.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Philip A. Bence, Chapter: A New Church in Antioch. In *Acts: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Taylor, "Barnabas and Paul, and the Mission from Antioch." *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem: A Study in Relationships in Authority in Earliest Christianity*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 1992. 88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474213943.ch-004>.

<sup>6</sup> Pervo. 289-290.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, 1830.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce W. Longenecker, "Lukan Aversion to Humps and Hollows: The Case of Acts 11.27-12.25," *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688504000128>.

The interruption evident in this pericope is demonstrated more clearly through the bracketing of pivotal verses, connecting the story in 11:19-30 with the ongoing story of the entire narrative. 11:19 recounts the persecution of Stephen, picking up from 8:4; whereas 11:30 picks up again in 12:25 with the return of Barnabas and Saul from their mission in Jerusalem. Keener notes that “Together these verses bracket an important summary section about the mixed church in Antioch, offering our only brief survey of what must have been a dramatic locus of transition in the early Christian movement.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Holladay suggests that reading 11:19-30 as a literary flashback, concurrent with the events that take place in the household of Cornelius is preferred over a chronological reading of the text.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, the transitional shift in the early Christian movement toward a blended community takes place in parallel with a geographic expansion of the mission itself. The evolution of the mission from the Jerusalem center to “the ends of the earth” becomes more apparent as the narrative unfolds in the current pericope. Jerusalem and surrounding regions serve as the axis of the narrative up to 11:19, then the narrative shifts to include the dual axes of Antioch and Jerusalem through 15:35 as Jerusalem’s symbolic role remains central and the mission expands.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Keener, 1830.

<sup>10</sup> Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 245.

<sup>11</sup> Pervo, 290.

### *Historical Observations*

Founded by Seleucus I Nicator, after his father Antiochus about 300 B.C., Antioch ranked third in importance next to Rome and Alexandria and boasted an estimated population of half a million, dwarfing other cities such as Joppa and even Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> A cultural center of activity and diversity, Antioch was known for a love of pleasure-seeking and extravagant living. In the scheme of God's plan, all of these factors combine to cultivate fertile ground for the spread of Christianity, particularly as people were seeking religious and spiritual satisfaction for their individual needs and circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

The significance of Jerusalem as the symbolic center of the early Christian community in Acts pivots toward expansion of the mission to "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), especially as the Christian diaspora travels to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch in response to the persecution of believers in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen (11:19). While the first Christians in Antioch were rooted in Jewish community, subsequent converts would come from non-Jewish backgrounds. The stage for this pivot is set as one observes the progression of tension between Hebrews and Hellenists in Jerusalem beginning in 6:1, as the Hellenists express concern over their widows being overlooked in the distribution of food.

Noting the unique expansion of the early Christian movement, Hengel observes that the influence of Greek-speaking Jews on outsiders, "...transcending the boundaries of language and culture, distinguishes earliest Christianity from all other Palestinian

---

<sup>12</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 17, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 417.

<sup>13</sup> Glanville Downey. *The History of Antioch*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 272.

Jewish movements, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the Essenes and the Baptist movement, the activity of which was largely confined to Palestine before the destruction of the Temple.”<sup>14</sup>

The location of Antioch in this region on the Western end of the Orontes river was ideally situated for trade, structured by Roman authority that provided modernized public works and updated harbors.<sup>15</sup> The architecture and layout of the city is thought to have closely resembled other Hellenistic cities, especially with regard to placement of streets and the existence of walls around the city.<sup>16</sup> The beauty and sophistication of Antioch attracted a wealthy Jewish population who built beautifully adorned synagogues, of which Josephus commented “constantly attracted to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks.”<sup>17</sup> Witherington notes as well that the established Jewish community in Antioch during the middle of the first century can be attributed, in part to an abundant number of proselytes to Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

### *Form, Structure, Movement*

As the narrative of the gospel’s spread to Gentile believers continues, the story in Acts 11:19-30 expands the missional focus of the preceding units, serving as a

---

<sup>14</sup> Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 71.

<sup>15</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Antioch of Syria,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 120.

<sup>16</sup> Magnus Zetterholm. *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (1st ed.). 2003. 19. Routledge. <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780203449493>

<sup>17</sup> John McRay, “Antioch,” ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 68.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 366–367.

transitional fragment as noted earlier. From this point forward, Luke's narrative begins to focus on the growth of the movement as it expands outward from the missional hub in Judea to Antioch and beyond. The character focus begins to change as well, moving from a focus on Peter to a focus on the ministry of Barnabas and Saul.

As the story of the early Christian diaspora mission is nested between the larger stories of Peter and Paul, the boundary of the early Christian movement expands as well. Simon Samuel notes this development as he states that a re-reading of the story is necessary in order to observe "...the expansion of the early Christian mission beyond the geo-cultural and ethnic boundaries of Judaism by the diaspora missionaries like Philip and the certain men of Cyprus and Cyrene."<sup>19</sup>

For the sake of discussion and understanding the text, our current pericope can be divided into four parts, with several sub-parts. As the narrative unfolds and evolves to encompass the Gentile mission in Antioch and beyond, the following divisions are helpful to aid in our understanding:

- I. Spread of the gospel (11:19-21)
  - a. The gospel is proclaimed only to Jews (11:19)
  - b. The gospel is proclaimed to Gentiles (11:20-21)
- II. Barnabas sent to Antioch from Jerusalem (11:22-24)
- III. Saul brought to Antioch (11:25-26)
  - a. Barnabas travels to Tarsus to locate Saul (11:25)
  - b. Believers in Antioch are given the title - "Christians" (11:26)
- IV. Antiochian Christians respond to famine in Judea (11:27-30)

#### *Spread of the Gospel (11:19-21)*

<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the

---

<sup>19</sup> Simon Samuel, "'Certain Men' of Cyprus and Cyrene in Acts: Diaspora Missionaries of the Early Christianity," in *Diaspora Christianities: Global Scattering and Gathering of South Asian Christians*, ed. Sam George (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media: Fortress Press, 2018), 30.

word to no one except Jews.<sup>20</sup> But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.<sup>21</sup> The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

As this segment begins, one can observe the initial link with the wider narrative as the scattered believers travel northward in response to the stoning of Stephen in 8:1. The mission in Jerusalem was halted as believers scattered because of intense persecution, and as Hellenistic Jews returned to their homelands, they shared the teachings of Christ with other Jews.<sup>20</sup> Keener observes that Luke had already set the stage for evangelization after Stephens martyrdom in 8:4 as the believers carried the message wherever they went.<sup>21</sup> The evangelization efforts of these believers was initially directed exclusively toward those waiting in expectation for the Messiah. It is interesting to note that Luke does not record a response from the Jewish community because of the disciples' teaching, a stark contrast to the large response driven by the proclamation of the Good News by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene.<sup>22</sup>

The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene remain unnamed, and it is interesting that Jewish people from Cyrene, which is located in North Africa would make the trek to Antioch. Cyprus, on the other hand is an island not too far from Antioch and it is reasonable to expect that those from Cyprus enjoyed a much shorter journey. As to the fact that the believers from these two locations barely receive an honorable mention, Samuel observes:

---

<sup>20</sup> Kistemaker, 418.

<sup>21</sup> Keener, 1833.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Acts of the Apostles: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2013.

...when we read between the lines and deconstruct the Peter-Paul narrative, we find a decisive remapping of mission initiated by a tiny group of ordinary diaspora Jewish-Christians at the very outset of the early Christian mission. Such a decisive redrawing of early Christian mission receives only an ‘abbreviated attention’ in Acts.<sup>23</sup>

Next, to whom these “men of Cyprus and Cyrene” proclaimed the Lord Jesus is the topic of textual debate. Metzger points out that the textual problems surrounding Luke’s use of the word “Hellenists” are compounded as one considers the diversity of views related to its inclusion in this verse.<sup>24</sup> More particularly, a variant in the text is the source of debate, as some scholars prefer to translate the noun *Hellenistes* as “Greeks” (*Hellēnas*) whereas others favor the translation “Hellenists” (*Hellēnistas*).<sup>25</sup> Observing the parallel construction of the stylistically varied phrase in verses 19 and 20, Pervo points out that the reference to speaking only to Jews in verse 19 follows a Lucan pattern that places “Jews first”, concluding that the parallel must include Gentiles or “non-Jews”.<sup>26</sup> Either way, whether the noun is translated *Hellēnas* or *Hellēnistas*, there is observable contrast with the use of *Ioudaios* (Jews) in verse 19, leading to the conclusion that the author’s primary aim was to highlight the Gentile mission at this point in the text.

As these early believers proclaimed the Lord Jesus to Gentiles present in Antioch, Luke records that “a great number became believers and turned to the Lord” (11:21). This event signaled a shift in the missional focus of the early church, solidifying belief in a resurrected being with power and authority. To this point, Pervo emphasizes that “The

---

<sup>23</sup> Samuel, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* (4th Rev. Ed.) (London, UK; New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1994), 340.

<sup>25</sup> Kistemaker, 418.

<sup>26</sup> Pervo, 291.



Jesus worshiped by these mixed Jewish-gentile urban communities was a powerful heavenly being, not a Galilean prophet vindicated by resurrection, nor simply a future apocalyptic judge.”<sup>27</sup> Based on verse 19, we can assume that the ministry of the early believers took place within the synagogues among Jews and Greeks and from there expanded as the mission flourished and news of this success reached Jerusalem (11:22).

Perhaps the most significant development in this new missional frontier is the fact that the Gentiles in Antioch became Christians without becoming Jews first, that is they were not required to undergo circumcision prior to conversion. This process is clearly blessed by the Lord himself.<sup>28</sup> We see God’s blessing of Gentiles coming to salvation through Jesus in Luke’s utilization of the phrase “hand of the Lord” in verse 21. This phrase echoes the Old Testament metaphor used to describe God’s involvement in a similar way.<sup>29</sup> Further, the connection with 11:18, confirming the expression of the church in Jerusalem in response to Peter’s defense of Gentile inclusion in 11:4-17 is striking. The fact that “...God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18) becomes exceedingly clear as the story unfolds and the church in Jerusalem begins to affirm this revelation.

*Barnabas sent to Antioch from Jerusalem (11:22-24)*

22 News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.

---

<sup>27</sup> Pervo, 292.

<sup>28</sup> Justo L. González. *Acts: The Gospel of The Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 92.

<sup>29</sup> See 1 Samuel 5:6, 9 and 2 Samuel 3:12.

The church in Jerusalem, still struggling to accept Gentile inclusion as part of God's plan for salvation, remains hesitant to fully embrace this new development. As news of the conversion of Gentiles reaches Jerusalem, they respond with inquiry by sending Barnabas to Antioch (11:22). This procedure echoes earlier responses of the church as they sent John and Peter to investigate the conversion of Simon and the people of Samaria (8:14), as well as to inquire about Peter's preaching to the Gentiles after the conversion of Cornelius' household (11:1). It is clear from these instances that approval of the Jerusalem church is necessary for the expansion of the mission.

Pervo identifies Peter as being the most likely apostle for this role, especially as he was experienced with Gentiles and had performed this role in Samaria previously.<sup>30</sup> However, Luke's description of Barnabas as a "good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (11:24) aligns Barnabas' character to the work of God and seems to serve as part of the reason he was chosen to report on the happenings in Antioch rather than one of the Twelve.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Gonzalez points out that the text doesn't seem to tell whether Barnabas was sent to investigate and report back to Jerusalem, or to support those in Antioch, other than the fact that he stayed in Antioch for a long while.<sup>32</sup>

Johnson notes that modern translations clean up two awkward constructions in the first part of verse 22, also magnifying the role of the Jerusalem church to approve the mission in Antioch. The translation ties together two participial clauses, used by Luke only in this verse, that also echo the participial construction patterns employed by Paul in

---

<sup>30</sup> Pervo, 293.

<sup>31</sup> Barnabas, who was originally Joseph of Cyprus is given his name by the apostles in 4:36, that is translated "son of encouragement." This naming serves to reinforce his apostolic identity as pointed out by Johnson, 222.

<sup>32</sup> Gonzalez, 93.

Romans 6:1, 1 Corinthians 1:2, and 2 Corinthians 1:1.<sup>33</sup> Literally, the clauses together read “it was heard in the ears of the Church, that was in Jerusalem.” Keener comments that the wording of this verse reflects the sentence construction of the OT LXX as well, specifically Isaiah 5:9, further emphasizing the authority of the Jerusalem church.<sup>34</sup>

The joyful response of Barnabas in verse 23, as he witnesses the grace of God at work among the people of Antioch, is in contrast with the negative initial reaction of Jerusalem earlier in 11:3. Barnabas’s response acknowledges the grace (*charis*) of God rather than the Spirit of God, which Dunn notes is used by Luke in anticipation of the Pauline response in the ensuing segments.<sup>35</sup> Luke’s use of *charis* in this pericope not only acknowledges God’s approval and blessing of the work being done, but also serves to signify the grace of God at work as the movement is furthered by God’s direction. As Barnabas rejoiced in what he was witnessing, he exhorted (*parakaleo*) the congregation (11:23). It is notable that while the NRSV misses this nuance, reading in the Greek suggests that Barnabas engaged in a continual act of exhortation with the congregation and not just a one-time occurrence.<sup>36</sup> Johnson writes that Barnabas’ exhortation “enacts his apostolic identity as *huios tēs paraklēseōs*.”<sup>37</sup> The movement in Antioch to this point has experienced success like that of Jerusalem during its early days of mission.

---

<sup>33</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: the Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 220.

<sup>34</sup> Holladay, 246.

<sup>35</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 143.

<sup>36</sup> As pointed out by Gonzalez, 93. The verb *parakaleo* is in the present infinitive, suggesting an ongoing action, or continual process..

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, 221.

*Saul Brought to Antioch (11:25-26)*

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

After witnessing the grace of God at work among the people in Antioch, Barnabas travels to Tarsus, Saul’s hometown<sup>38</sup>, to bring Saul back to witness these things for himself. This journey takes place on the heels of the earlier journey of Barnabas to introduce Saul to the apostles in Jerusalem (9:27-30). The current trip however, differs from Saul’s introduction to the disciples in Jerusalem, as the Hellenists in Jerusalem did not give Saul a warm welcome but instead sought to kill him (9:29).

As one reads the text, it seems as though Barnabas had to search Saul out while in Tarsus. Gonzalez also notes this observation, pointing to the Greek text as suggesting an ongoing search on the part of Barnabas.<sup>39</sup> Pervo dives deeper into the Greek text, suggesting that the action on Saul’s part points to his independence and not as a subordinate to Barnabas, effectively causing Barnabas to beg Saul to come to Antioch.<sup>40</sup> Keener suggests another possible reason for Barnabas to seek out Saul as Tarsus was only about one hundred miles from Antioch, while Jerusalem was around three hundred miles.<sup>41</sup>

In our current text, Saul is brought in as an authority, and in contrast with Saul’s previous interaction with the Hellenists in Jerusalem (9:29), those in attendance seem to

---

<sup>38</sup> Holladay notes that Saul’s connection to Tarsus is a Lukan emphasis not seen in the writings of Paul. Holladay, 246.

<sup>39</sup> Gonzalez, 93.

<sup>40</sup> Pervo, 294.

<sup>41</sup> Keener, 1846.

be more affirming of Saul's presence among them. This may be attributed to the fact that Barnabas had already spent a considerable amount of time with Saul and built relationships with the people of Antioch. Similarly, as an important leader within the church, Barnabas was positioned to bridge these two communities. Taylor emphasizes that the relationship between Saul and Barnabas is critical for understanding the thrust of the mission within Antioch and beyond.<sup>42</sup>

Saul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for at least a year and made an impact on the people through their teaching, further emphasizing Luke's focus on the Spirit of God as the main actor in conversion, for "The hand of Lord was with them..." (v. 21). This mixed crowd, composed of more than Jews alone, witnessed the work of God among the believers, leading them to recognize these believers as "Christians". The term "Christians" (*Christianos*), is first used in this verse and only two more times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) by outsiders to recognize followers of Jesus as a group distinct from adherents to Judaism. Linguistically, however the term "Christian" more than likely did not appear until 90-110CE and is similar to other terms related to identifying political figures.<sup>43</sup> Because Paul does not utilize this term in his writings, Pervo concludes that Antioch as the originating source of the word is unlikely, citing Luke's possible use of a Gentile missionary source dated c. 90-100CE.<sup>44</sup> Other scholars suggest agreement with

---

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, 90.

<sup>43</sup> Pervo, 294-95.

<sup>44</sup> Pervo, 295.

this view, pointing out that Luke's audience would have been familiar with the term while those in Antioch would not have been familiar.<sup>45</sup>

*Antiochian Christians respond to famine in Judea (11:27-30)*

27 At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. 29 The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; 30 this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

While the disciples in Antioch were devoted to the Gentile mission there, they retained continuity with the church in Jerusalem. Luke's reference to "At that time"<sup>46</sup> may suggest a marker of significance or simply a chronological marker of time. Keener connects Luke's use of this phrase with its "evocation of biblical phraseology..."<sup>47</sup>, bridging this work with the rest of the biblical narrative.<sup>48</sup> As noted earlier, the relationship between the church in Antioch and the mother church in Jerusalem is vital for understanding the connection with the overall mission.

The fact that prophets "came down" from Jerusalem points to the fact that Jerusalem was positioned at a higher altitude than Antioch. The group of prophets mentioned here solidify their role as a part of the church, especially as the story unfolds

---

<sup>45</sup> Keener, 1849.

<sup>46</sup> Some translations read "In those days"

<sup>47</sup> Keener, 1851.

<sup>48</sup> Pervo suggests that the introduction to verse 27 contains no temporal value, instead existing only as an indicator of a narrative shift. 296.

in future chapters.<sup>49</sup> The term “prophets” refers to those in the early church who received heavenly messages and in turn would share those messages with the wider community. These messages must hold consistency with the values of the Kingdom of God, as evidenced in Luke’s reference of prophets throughout Acts. For the early church, the belief that God still speaks through prophets was common, even after the resurrection.<sup>50</sup>

Further emphasizing the role of prophets in Luke’s narrative, Agabus is named and his prophecy takes stage as he predicts a “severe famine all over the world.” Agabus is later known as being a prophet who had come down from Judea, predicting the imprisonment of Paul (21:10-11) among the believers while staying in the house of Philip the evangelist.<sup>51</sup> While Agabus predicts a worldwide famine<sup>52</sup>, scholars point out the difficulty in this prophecy as the response of the believers addresses a local famine in Judea. It is not uncommon for prophetic oracles to suggest universal, or worldwide famines that point to eschatological consequences as a hyperbolic expression.<sup>53</sup> Luke’s reference to a severe famine suggests the varying degrees to which it affected people throughout the Roman empire, leading interpreters to take Luke’s description as being a broad, rather than literal approach.<sup>54</sup>

The disciples respond to the famine with a decision that, according to their ability, they would send relief to the believers in Judea. Paul and Barnabas would be the ones to

---

<sup>49</sup> Holladay, 247; Pervo, 296.

<sup>50</sup> Allen, 106.

<sup>51</sup> Keener, 247.

<sup>52</sup> Kistemaker points out that Agabus “merely predicts; he does not prophecy”, 425.

<sup>53</sup> Pervo, 296.

<sup>54</sup> Kistemaker, 424.

deliver the relief, giving it to the elders in Jerusalem. Witherington points out that Luke's recording of this prophecy and subsequent response of the believers suggests the low social and economic status of many if not most of the early Christians, especially in light of references to sharing in community (6:1-4; 2:42-47) and the seeking of those more financially secure to meet the needs of other believers (4:34-37).<sup>55</sup> This is significant as one considers that the proceeds were not gathered from a central fund in the church, but through a shared, voluntary collection from each of the believers, "according to their ability".

### *Conclusion*

The missional focus of Acts, as witnessed through the inclusion of Gentiles in 11:19-30 points to God's presence and action in preparing the church to expand and develop within the context of culture and the formation of Christian community. Even in the wake of disruption (persecution of believers), the early church forged ahead, adapting to the new environment, stretching their reach and impact. For the believers in Antioch, we see Gentiles persuaded to become followers of God with faith in Jesus as the narrative of diaspora mission expansion unfolds. As Gentiles embrace this mission and the church in Jerusalem supports the work taking place in Antioch, a symbiotic relationship is cultivated and sustained, leading to greater missional impact.

Understanding this text as we consider the context of our time will lead us to embrace more fully the formation of Christian community in contexts that stretch our typical understanding of where God's Spirit works to bring transformation. For the early

---

<sup>55</sup> Witherington, 373.



Christians in Antioch, sharing the Good News of Jesus with others who were just like them was not enough, and although some of their actions brought a negative response from Jerusalem, they realized the importance of a continued relationship with the inherited church while simultaneously expanding their mission to Gentiles.

Emphasizing this mutually beneficial relationship means understanding the importance of the traditional, or inherited church (Jerusalem) in relationship with the innovating or emerging church (Antioch) as foundational to the Christian mission today. While the church in Antioch looked radically different from the church in Jerusalem, the mission was able to expand as each church grew in relationship with one another. When the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check on the church in Antioch, they found that the believers there were empowered by the grace of God and “...he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (11:23).

Fresh expressions of church are one way that the local church can engage in meaningful witness for Jesus within the context of culture and Christian community.<sup>56</sup> The diaspora mission of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church looks different from the persecution-driven diaspora of the early Christians. Today’s scattering of believers is driven primarily by technology, as the local church finds itself increasingly challenged to reach those more inclined to utilize technology and embrace a world connected through digital means over a traditional, analog-connected world. Reaching into the digital frontier through online fresh expressions is an extension of the reality experienced by the early church. The story of the early believers in Antioch serves as a foundation for the church of today in understanding the importance of remaining connected with one another while reaching

---

<sup>56</sup> Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches*, 10.

outward in new and innovative ways as we carry out our mission to make disciples of Jesus.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### *Introduction*

John Wesley's resolve to encourage Christians to grow in holiness of heart and life, known as the process of sanctification, is said to have been the central aim of the early Methodist movement.<sup>1</sup> To this end, Wesley pioneered ways to reach people through various methods and means, connecting them with the established church in ways it had not been done before. From engaging in field preaching as he shared the gospel with those in miner camps and debtors' prisons, to connecting people to one another and the love of God through class meetings, small groups of individuals dedicated to spiritual formation, Wesley discovered ways to connect people with God, while maintaining a vital link with the local church.<sup>2</sup> Engaging these new Christian communities through contextual, missional, and formational networks brought about the development of a new movement of small groups, gradually evolving into a network of chapels and churches, forming what has come to be known as the Methodist movement.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Randy L. Maddox, "Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons From North American Methodism," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 51, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 151.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew C Thompson, "'To Stir Them Up to Believe, Love, Obey' - Soteriological Dimensions of the Class Meeting in Early Methodism," *Methodist History* 48, no. 3 (April 2010): pp. 160-178, <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/778>, 160.

<sup>3</sup> Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 44-45.

The role of conversion and spiritual formation practices in early Methodism were viewed as a process rather than a one-time, instantaneous event, and not all these processes took place within the church building. The class meeting was viewed as an effective means of experiencing this process of encountering God's grace in Christian community. During these small group meetings, participants engaged in Christian practices that introduced, taught, and enhanced Christian spiritual formation through testimony, shared learning, and leaders who would encourage seekers to discover Christ.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, engaging in the innovative, missional focused work of field preaching, Wesley found himself able to connect with people who were otherwise not connecting with the established church.

Ultimately, the stages of Christian formation experienced by early Methodists continued to encourage participation in class meetings as foundational for evangelistic and catechetical means while the work of field preaching continued to develop and become one of the hallmarks of the Methodist movement to bring new people to faith in Christ. In the process, those brought to faith through field preaching would become participants in class meetings, leading to experiences of conversion as a response to the teaching of dedicated class leaders.<sup>5</sup> This innovative, missional, and contextual process is important for the church today to understand, implement, and develop as we seek to make disciples of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The new missional frontier, created by and continuing to expand through digitization, brings new challenges and opportunities for the local church. Sharing the

---

<sup>4</sup> Philip F Hardt, "The Evangelistic and Catechetical Role of the Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism," *Methodist History* 38, no. 1 (October 1999): pp. 14-26, <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/6487>, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Hardt, 16.

gospel and forming new Christian communities in online spaces brings a new sense of mission to the people called Methodist. Pioneering approaches to ministry on the digital frontier requires churches to embrace ministry through incarnational processes that prioritize relationships and build meaningful connections with those outside the walls of the traditional structure of the church.

The divide of church and unchurched in the postmodern world is increasingly expanding as the local church struggles to leverage opportunities to reach into uncharted territory. The natural propensity for American culture to readily embrace technology and digitization while the local church struggles to see the possibilities only furthers the process. As technology continues to develop and chart new courses, the local church struggles to maintain relevance and often becomes discouraged, leading to disillusionment and eventually a failure to connect with people outside the church.

John Wesley and the early Methodists knew what it meant to engage people where they were, in the spaces in which they were already present, and by which they were most receptive to hear and receive the gospel message. As field preaching, classes, bands, societies and ministries of visitation were developed, disciples were formed and lives were changed. Despite resistance to embrace these innovative practices, along with challenges largely unseen, the early Methodist movement gave way to practices the church of today can appreciate and replicate. The leadership of John Wesley and the continued perseverance of the early Methodist movement provides a framework for the challenges faced by the church today.

*John Wesley, The Church of England, and Primitive Christianity*

John Wesley's relationship with the Church of England formed and reinforced his theology, practice, and witness of faith. And, although his concept of the church changed over time, Wesley remained committed to the Church of England throughout his life. Specifically, Wesley was committed to the foundational core of the Church of England, finding an anchor for a reformist view as stipulated in Article XIX of the historic Thirty-Nine Articles, which states:

1. The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.
2. As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch have erred; so also, the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith.<sup>6</sup>

Wesley's view on the church, while seeming more reformed in his adherence to Article XIX, can be encapsulated by a clear affirmation of catholicity as he was an heir of the Anglican Reformation. Collins observes that "Wesley's catholic sensibilities were so strong that he would not 'exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines... are sometimes, yea, frequently preached. Neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered.'"<sup>7</sup> Wesley's viewpoint leads some scholars to submit that Wesley took more liberty to interpret Article XIX more freely and comprehensively than its original authors had intended.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> As cited by David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 9.

<sup>7</sup> From John Wesley's Sermons as cited by Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 238-239.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 239. Citing Albert Outler's contention on Wesley's interpretation of Article XIX.

While Wesley had no intention to split from the Church of England, in 1729, as Methodism arose in Oxford among members of the Holy Club, a sense that Methodism would act as a reformer of the Anglican Church arose within Wesley's thinking. In response to a question about the rise of Methodism itself, Wesley writes "In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith. They saw likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise a holy people."<sup>9</sup> For John and his brother Charles, holiness became the goal, not establishing a new church, but reforming the existing church to coincide with God's call to holiness. Collins observes that this mission of spreading holiness became a reforming movement within the larger church, leading Wesley to see the reversal of more formalistic Christianity to a rootedness in primitive Christianity, of which Wesley was a student. To this point, Wesley retained a high view of the Church of England, even with its difficulties, holding in tension the deep tradition and history with the need for reform within the institution.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Rise of Methodism*

Hammond notes that the draw toward primitivism in eighteenth-century Britain was a significant cultural phenomenon, possessing much of art, architecture, economics, music, religion, and literature.<sup>11</sup> For Wesley, the desire to restore the church to its first

---

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1831), 8:300.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 244.

<sup>11</sup> Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity*, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014 (London, UK: Oxford Press, 2014), 1. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198701606.001.0001.

love, back to its purist form was the goal. The Wesley brothers were raised in a home where the theological and spiritual environment was considered both High Church and Puritan. Albin observes that the Wesley home emanated a theology that "...was a spiritual theology based on the 'love of God' rather than the 'faith in Christ' of Continental Protestantism."<sup>12</sup> This foundation led John to explore themes and insight about the love of God as an inward expression of faith through his early years in High Church Anglicanism and later through Moravian Pietism after his ministry in Georgia.<sup>13</sup>

In June 1720, Wesley went to Christ Church in Oxford where he and his brother initiated the Holy Club. Wesley's experiences at Oxford would continue to be formative and central to his formation of theology and experience of faith as he continued his journey toward sanctification.<sup>14</sup> This time of revival (1720-1735) was later described by Wesley as the "first rise of Methodism," giving way to being overcome by fear en route to Georgia with the Moravians in 1735, subsequently leading to the failed missionary activity in the American colonies.<sup>15</sup> However, Wesley records that in April 1736, "twenty or thirty persons met at my house,"<sup>16</sup> the "second rise." And finally, just prior to the formation of the Fetter Lane Society in London, Wesley experienced his heart being "strangely warmed" as someone read Luther's preface to the book of Romans on

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas R. Albin, *Experience of God*, The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies, Eds. James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>13</sup> David Lowes Watson, 42.

<sup>14</sup> John Wigger, "John Wesley and Francis Asbury," in *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honour of Henry D. Rack*, ed. Robert Webster (Eugene, OR: The Lutterworth Press, 2015), 175.

<sup>15</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 185.

<sup>16</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Second Rise of Methodism: Georgia," *Methodist History* 28, no. 3 (January 1990): 118.



Aldersgate Street (May 24, 1738).<sup>17</sup> This “third rise of Methodism” seems to have been an area of tension for Wesley as he navigated what it meant to be ordained within the Anglican Church and subsequently felt extraordinarily called to ministry with those whom the traditional structures of church were unable, or sometimes unwilling, to reach.<sup>18</sup>

### *Classes, Bands, and Societies*

John Wesley believed that the doctrine of entire sanctification, or full sanctification, was the reason for Methodism’s existence. Kevin Watson describes the process of entire sanctification through the lens of salvation, stating: “salvation brings not only forgiveness and pardon but also empowerment and freedom to live a faithful and holy life *entirely and right now*.”<sup>19</sup> For Wesley, just as his upbringing was founded upon the love of God, so was his theology as he grew in faith and trusting God’s goodness for himself. In his work, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley outlines the doctrine of entire sanctification as “purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers.”<sup>20</sup> This “purity of intention” was something that Wesley would contend could not be pursued at an individual level only, but in the context of caring Christian community. In his preface

---

<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (London: C.H. Kelly, 1903), May 24, 1738.

<sup>18</sup> Beck and Acevedo, Loc. 185.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Watson, *Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification – The Lost Power of the Methodist Movement* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2021), Loc. 317, Kindle.

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as believed and taught by Mr. John Wesley from the year 1725 to the year 1777* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2014), 113.

to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, we get a glimpse as to Wesley's view of entire sanctification in a community context:

Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaires" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.<sup>21</sup>

About three weeks prior to his experience on Aldersgate Street (May 1, 1738), Wesley met with Peter Bohler in the home of James Hutton, where the three of them agreed to establish a society for Christians searching for deeper Christian fellowship. Based primarily on the experience of God's love in Christian community, the men agreed on two rules that would guide the gathering of Christians in these societies:

1. That they will meet together once a week to confess their faults one to another, and to pray for one another that they may be healed [James 5:16].
2. That any others, of whose sincerity they are well assured, may, if they desire it, meet with them for that purpose.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after early Methodist polity was initially developed, small groups of Christians began to gather as they sought God's holiness through societies, classes, and bands. As the doctrine of entire sanctification gained more traction, class meetings developed and multiplied. Regarded by Wesley as spiritual incubators, class meetings were seen as places where class leaders were revered as the backbone of spiritual leadership in the movement. David Lowes Watson notes that Wesley viewed class

---

<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), viii.  
[https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/04\\_Hymns\\_and\\_Sacred\\_Poems\\_%281739%29.pdf](https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/04_Hymns_and_Sacred_Poems_%281739%29.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Frank Baker, "Eye Witness to Early Methodism," *Methodist History* 28, no. 2 (January 1990), 94. Baker cites the work of Daniel Benham and notes that this gathering was the foundation for the Fetter Lane Moravian Society as well as Wesley's London Society.

leaders as effectively combining “disciplinary and spiritual discernment so that fellowship in the classes would be a means of growing discipleship.”<sup>23</sup>

Wesley recognized the need for growing Christians to be rooted in the doctrinal structure of the Christian faith, grounded in the traditions and doctrine of the church itself. In essence, the societies, classes, and bands were viewed as “little churches” that operated within the integrity of the larger church. Watson notes “The inference is clear: The structure of the larger ecclesia must be affirmed as inherently valid and necessary if the freedom of the ecclesiola is to be exercised responsibly.”<sup>24</sup>

Over time, as Methodism grew and the membership approached tens of thousands, Wesley’s practice of overseeing class leaders and maintaining oversight became more difficult. As more assistants were recruited and trained, errors were made along the way, leading to inadequate leaders in some of the class meeting groups. Eventually, these challenges would be seen as instrumental to the eventual decline of the Methodist class meeting.<sup>25</sup>

Another challenge facing Methodism, particularly in America was the increase of wealth and social status of Methodists, leading to issues heightened by the disparities between social class in the class meetings themselves.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, these disparities and challenges led to a generally negative view of class meetings by the general public. At the same time, these challenges proved to be instrumental in aiding the proliferation and

---

<sup>23</sup> David Lowes Watson, 101.

<sup>24</sup> David Lowes Watson, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Edward White, “The Decline of the Class Meeting,” *Methodist History* 38, no. 4 (July 2000): pp. 258-267, <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/6479>, 208.

<sup>26</sup> White, 209.

generally favorable view of class meetings in some areas as Christians of different social status learned to live in Christian community with one another.<sup>27</sup>

Wesley's response to the complexities now confronting the Methodist movement was to create a way to regulate the societies to ensure consistency in doctrine and theology. Leading up to the creation of this system of checks and balances was a series of encounters Wesley had with Methodists involved in societies. Shortly after a society was created in Newcastle during the early 1740's, Wesley visited and was encouraged by the possibilities for evangelism. However, upon a follow-up visit about a year later, Wesley observed that discipline among many of the leaders was lacking. In response, Wesley decided to investigate the situation, leading to 140 people leaving the society, 64 people having been expelled by Wesley himself.<sup>28</sup>

Wesley knew something had to be put in place to maintain integrity, while still allowing the societies to operate with a low threshold for joining a society. The standard Wesley puts forward is based on three rules, known as the General Rules. Thompson abbreviates them in this way:

First, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind—especially that which is most generally practised...

Secondly, By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing good of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men:

To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison.

To their souls, by instructing, reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that 'we are not to do good

---

<sup>27</sup> White, 210.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, "The Practical Theology of the General Rules," *The Asbury Journal* 68/2:6-27 (2013), 8.

unless our heart be free to it.’...

Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God.

Such are:

The public worship of God;

The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded;

The Supper of the Lord;

Family and private prayer;

Searching the Scriptures; and

Fasting, or abstinence.<sup>29</sup>

Wesley found these three General Rules to be vitally important to the overall integrity of the Methodist movement that he insisted on adherence to them. The centrality of the General Rules for governance are emphasized by Wesley as he writes:

If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any one of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul, as they that must give account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But if then he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.<sup>30</sup>

### *Submitting to Be More Vile – Field Preaching*

Not long after Wesley’s Aldersgate experience, he received an invitation from George Whitefield and William Seward to join them in Bristol. Wesley was already busy with the society at Fetter Lane and was continuing plans with the development of other societies as they were taking root. Wesley writes his heart, stating “This I was not at all forward to do.”<sup>31</sup> However, a few days later on March 31, 1739 Wesley meets Whitefield in the evening at Bristol to discover Whitefield engaging in field preaching, a method not

---

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Practical Theology*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Practical Theology*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1951)  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal/journal.vi.iii.i.html>

ever considered by Wesley to be appropriate, or effective. In fact, the notion unsettles Wesley to the point that he writes,

I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to know for sure what else Wesley was considering in his mind as he pondered the thought of field preaching, but one may guess that considerations of the expanding gospel reached his heart, especially as we know that he did indeed engage in field preaching to "...a little society which was accustomed to meet once or twice a week in Nicholas Street."<sup>33</sup> The following day, Wesley pens one of his most famous (or infamous) writings as he states, "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."<sup>34</sup> Several days later, Wesley would preach to several thousand people through field preaching in Bristol, on the Hannam Mount in Kingswood, and then such a great number of people in the Back Lane that the weight of all the people shifted the floor, garnering their attention even more.<sup>35</sup>

The weight of the necessity for field preaching was palpable to Wesley. As he experienced the fruit of proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation in all the places a preacher wouldn't traditionally orate, Wesley felt a stir in his soul. In fact, Wesley was so

---

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley: Journal and Diaries II (1738-43)* eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Hartzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990), 46.

<sup>33</sup> Wesley, *Journal and Diaries II*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Wesley, *Journal and Diaries II*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *Journal and Diaries II*, 46.

powerfully convinced in the power of field preaching that he believed the work of sharing gospel would suffer if not practiced. On June 24, 1764, Wesley writes

About seven, I preached at the Gins, and the people flocked from all quarters. The want of field preaching has been one cause of deadness here. I do not find any great increase of the work of God without it. If ever this is laid aside, I expect the whole work will gradually die away.<sup>36</sup>

As early as 1730, the thrust of field preaching took on a defining role as the Great Awakening gained momentum. Noting that Methodists were not the only ones engaging in field preaching, Jackson observes that “. . . they were unique in how they systematized it into their entire method of ministry.”<sup>37</sup> After Wesley’s incorporation of field preaching in 1739, the practice became commonplace throughout Methodism shortly thereafter. John’s brother, Charles is also known to have made field preaching a central part of his ministry as well.<sup>38</sup>

Although field preaching is not unique to Methodism, the shift toward regular field preaching as an expectation became more prevalent. Jackson notes that the locations for field preaching were generally flexible and standardized, “. . . flexible in that the location could be almost any place. It was standardized in that the preaching followed a typical, though not mandated, format.”<sup>39</sup> The flexibility of location, along with standardization of the readily recognizable format created a method by which the gospel could be shared with as great a number of people as possible. The innovative drive of

---

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, June 24, 1764, *Journal and Diaries IV*, 473.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Jackson, *Offering Christ: John Wesley’s Evangelistic Vision* (Nashville, TN: Kingsood, 2017), 72.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson, *Offering Christ*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson, *Offering Christ*, 77.

early Methodist preachers to engage field preaching led others to offer their fields and open spaces for proclamation to take place as well.<sup>40</sup>

*Beyond Classes, Bands, and Field Preaching – The Ministry of Visitation*

As the Methodist movement continued to gain traction, uneven growth took place throughout. In some places, participation in classes, bands, and societies was beyond expectations, whereas in other places growth was stagnant at best. Making assumptions as to why the movement was experiencing stagnation in several areas, Wesley incorporated conventional tactics to curb the trajectory of the movement. Jackson observes that Wesley “. . . proceeded to make a number of unsurprising recommendations, such as getting Methodists to read more Methodist books, encouraging preachers to preach more often in the fields, insisting that Methodists meet more faithfully in their bands, and instructing all to fast more consistently.”<sup>41</sup> These correctives are unsurprising to most people who are at all familiar with church operations and maintaining ministry effectiveness. But Wesley wasn’t content with maintaining ministry status quo. Jackson continues his assessment of Wesley’s corrective as he observes:

At the end, however, Wesley offered a prescription for reviving the work of God that typically surprises contemporary laity and clergy alike in most Methodist traditions, if only because the practice is rarely mentioned in the literature on Methodism over the past two hundred years. His prescription: Methodists must visit people in their homes if the ministry is to thrive.<sup>42</sup>

Wesley’s prescription of visitation was a call back to the basics of ministry for the Methodist preachers. Beyond the message proclaimed in the fields and the accountability

---

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, *Offering Christ*, 77-78.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *Offering Christ*, 147.

<sup>42</sup> Jackson, *Offering Christ*, 147.



structures of the classes and bands, the work of visitation was to be central if the Methodist movement were to thrive. In fact, Beck and Picardo note that visitation, as prescribed by Wesley, translate into our modern situation as deeper layers of discipleship are expressed through the practice of apprenticeship as developed through visitation.<sup>43</sup> The cyclical nature of Methodism's process enables converts to become the ministers, and awakens the drive to share Jesus in as many places as possible.

### *Conclusion*

As we gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Wesley's motivation and goals, along with practices that aided and hindered effectiveness of discipleship processes in early Methodism, we can discover how these methods can be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially as they relate to how we engage in ministry with those outside the walls of the established church. Leaning into the innovative practices of Wesley and others during the early Methodist movement teaches us that the while the inherited church may struggle to see immediate significance, keeping the tension of traditioned innovation<sup>44</sup> remains key if we are to gain momentum in the movements of our day.

Wesley's insistence upon the affirmation of the inherited church as the doctrinal and polity foundation for the movements that extend the witness of the church through freedom at the edges is key to our discipleship processes today. Emphasizing the roll of incarnational discipleship and mission are critical if we are to experience growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Building on the foundation of forming mature disciples through

---

<sup>43</sup> Beck and Picardo, *Fresh Expressions in a Digital Age*, 92-93.

<sup>44</sup> "Traditioned Innovation" is a way of holding tradition and innovation in tension, rather than at odds with one another. L. Gregory Jones, Dean of Duke Divinity School coined the term and discusses it in detail at <https://faithandleadership.com/content/traditioned-innovation>.

organic relationships, we can experience a new awakening of God's people. Motivated by the opportunity for ministry on the digital frontier provides fuel for pioneers who desire to shape the culture by sharing Christ in new and innovative ways.

The cultivation of online fresh expressions are one way that the local church can engage in meaningful witness for Jesus within the context of culture and Christian community. The mission field of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church certainly looks different from the miner camps, debtor prisons, and fields of early Methodism. At the same time, there remains a need for the transformative power of God in our world. Today's scattering of believers is driven primarily by technology, as the local church finds itself increasingly challenged to reach those more inclined to utilize technology. Embracing a world connected through digital means invokes the power of connectedness that defines the gathered and scattered community known as the church. This certainly doesn't mean that a traditional, analog-connected world is going away anytime soon, but that there are opportunities in the digital frontier missed by the church focused on predominantly analog methods.

Further, just as the class and band meetings of the early Methodist movement provided space for people of various socioeconomic status to gather and be level with one another, so too does the opportunity present in online ministry. The walls of division and access are leveled as the digital environment is accessible from virtually anywhere. Understanding that access is a key piece of enabling ministry to take shape, the local church has the capability to connect with people groups previously thought impossible. The drive and motivation of John Wesley to bring the love of God to common, everyday people should motivate the church today to reach into spaces where people are already

gathering. Incidentally, these digital environments are also the space where people of varying abilities gather and embrace shared community. Reaching into these spaces will allow the church to bring hope and healing in the lives of those unable to attend worship in physical spaces.

The innovative genius of field preaching during the early Methodist movement serves as a catalyst as well for ministry on the digital frontier. The flexibility of meeting where the people were already gathering, tethered with the standardization of a recognizable format led to a familiarization with the practice. Today, as the church embraces digitality and ministry in online spaces, the draw of flexibility to meet people where they are already gathered is a vital part of online fresh expressions. This flexibility to gather in the digital frontier, much like field preaching in the days of early Methodism, serves to remind the church of the possibilities that exist. Coupled with a standardization of practice and belief, ministry on the digital frontier can take shape in ways that draw unchurched people into a life of following Jesus. Finding the spaces where people are searching for meaning, hungering for authenticity, and longing for hope doesn't take much effort, if the church remembers where to look.

Decisively, the ministry of John Wesley and the history of the people called Methodist serve as a foundation for the church of today as we build upon understanding and cultivating relational discipleship in the digital frontier. The importance of remaining connected with one another and tethered to the local church while simultaneously reaching outward in new and innovative ways enables the church to embrace more fully the mission of forming apprentices of Jesus. Embracing digitality and online space as a

valid mission field enables the church to build meaningful connections in spaces where people are already present.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### *Introduction*

In a society that is becoming increasingly post-Christian and culturally distant, the church struggles to adequately respond to the needs of those outside the walls.<sup>1</sup>

Combined with a general aversion to embracing emerging methods and technologies for reaching unchurched people with the gospel, the local church misses out on opportunities to develop and foster meaningful relationships with the unchurched and de-churched.<sup>2</sup>

Missional theology is a solid foundation for recovering the mission-drive that is the center of Christian evangelistic efforts. Missional theology is driven by relationship development, transcending the restrictive boundaries of the liberal/conservative debate, and is unashamedly Christ-centered, building a foundation for a theology that leads to life transformation.

Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) devoted himself to exploring and sharing the intersection of faith and life, culminating in over six decades of written works. Most notable is his work entitled *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, where Newbigin's sense of

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge : A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 72.

<sup>2</sup> The terms “unchurched” and “de-churched” are terms used to describe levels of church involvement. “unchurched” are people who have never been to church, except for funerals or weddings. “de-churched” is used to describe people who, at one point were part of a church. For more on this, see Church House Publishing, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2004), 37.

urgency and immediacy are on display in his consistent vigor and challenge to pastors and theologians alike. This “always on” approach to theology afforded Newbigin the opportunity to explore the Kingdom of God outside the bounds of theological labels, blurring ecclesiastical lines.

The intersection of faith in Jesus Christ and everyday life are hallmarks of Newbigin’s theology, further developing into an understanding of mission and evangelism as Christ-centered and community minded. As stated earlier, Newbigin blurred ecclesiastical lines as he was often thought of outside the traditional liberal/conservative labels. Some scholars, in an effort to understand Newbigin’s thinking on postmodernism, find that Newbigin often deconstructed postmodernism, expressing criticism and contradictions of the movement itself.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship has discovered Newbigin’s highly contextual theology as contributing to deeper understandings of postmodernism and post-Christendom as they relate to mission theology.<sup>4</sup>

The appeal of Newbigin’s approach to mission and evangelistic theology stems not from academic rigor or vigorous study (which his work certainly includes), but from his devotion to practical theology. Newbigin famously noted that he did not think of himself as a “professional theologian,” stating that “I can make no claim to either originality or to scholarship. I am a pastor and a preacher.”<sup>5</sup> For many scholars, Newbigin is viewed not as a systematic theologian, but as a strategic theologian, keeping his focus

---

<sup>3</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Church in the Post-Christian Society Between Modernity and Late Modernity: L. Newbigin’s Post-Critical Missional Ecclesiology,” *Mission and Postmodernities*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, Fortress Press. (2011): 86.

<sup>4</sup> Wilbert R. Shank, “Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution to Mission Theology,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (April, 2000): 60.

<sup>5</sup> Lesslie, Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989)

on contemporary issues that face the church, not in an exhaustive sense but to aid the church's understanding for theology and mission. Newbigin's contributions, primarily as a practitioner of mission, is notable and worthy of further consideration for understanding the reach of Christian mission today. Stults says as much as he suggests, "[Newbigin] is an outstanding example to the church that everyone should be engaged in serious intellectual work as a part of the mission of the church."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Sunquist recognizes the thrust of Newbigin's pastoral theology in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* as he observes, "...[Newbigin] is writing a book to help pastors and other church leaders re-imagine what it means to be a pastor in a post-Christendom world."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the challenges of leading ministry in a post-Christendom world, the local church of today has been thrown into a global pandemic, stretching resources and forcing a recalibration of what it means to be in mission. The rise of digitization and a culture that embraces online space as real and valid has outpaced the traditional understanding of what it means to be the church. The true strength of a healthy missional theology for today's church is a rediscovery of ministry that reaches beyond traditional understandings of space and leverages available space in the digital frontier to develop disciples of Jesus Christ. Newbigin's theology provides the heavy lifting for such a recalibration, inviting the local church to consider a missional theology that embraces the digital frontier.

---

<sup>6</sup> Donald Le Roy Stults, "Putting Newbigin in Perspective," in *Grasping Truth and Reality: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Mission to the Western World* (London, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2009), 233.

<sup>7</sup> Scott W. Sunquist, "The Legacy of Newbigin for Mission to the West," in *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Missiological Engagements)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 11.

*Missional Theology – Rooted in the Gospel*

Newbigin's understanding of missional theology is founded on practical experience. His numerous publications and articles, written out of a response to questions, comments, invitations, and lectures serve as starting points for conversation on missional theology.<sup>8</sup> In one of his most recognizable works, Newbigin works out what he calls the "Logic of Mission" as he lays the groundwork for understanding Christian mission as rooted in the gospel. Newbigin describes this beginning of mission as "...fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving."<sup>9</sup> In this vein, the work of missional theology is directly related to the momentum of the gospel as it spreads among people throughout time and space. Yet, Newbigin also observed that the modern missional movement struggles for viability as a chasm exists between "church" and "mission". Cheryl Peterson expounds on Newbigin's perspective as she states that the relationship of the church to the state under Christendom "...has led to nonmissionary ecclesiological reflection and patterns of church membership as well as the loss of an antithetical tension with culture."<sup>10</sup>

This underpinning of missional theology as movement drives our current understanding of what it is to operate as the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hirsch and Ferguson develop this understanding of missional theology further, stating "The church Jesus designed, the one in the pages of the New Testament, is precisely that: a grassroots

---

<sup>8</sup> George R. Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology: The Case of Lesslie Newbigin," *Missiology: An International Review* 27, no. 4 (October, 1999): 524.

<sup>9</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Cheryl M. Peterson, "Ecclesiology Post-Christendom: The Missional Church," in *Who Is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2013), 84.



people-movement with a vision for the transformation of society, operating as a decentralized network, spreading like a virus, and profoundly reproducible by every active agent in the system.”<sup>11</sup> For Goheen, participating in the *missio dei* itself implicates the local church as being “missional” in theology.<sup>12</sup> The missional underpinning of the local church serves as a reminder of mission as identity and vocation and not merely something the church merely does. The decentralized nature of missional theology stems from this vocational identity and leads the local church to experience a both/and approach to impacting culture with the gospel.

An interesting characteristic of Newbigin’s understanding of missional theology is his realization that most instances in Scripture where the gospel is proclaimed, is done so out of response to questions of people outside the church.<sup>13</sup> It is reasonable then to assume that the answers given would lead to a mission-oriented response of baptism and repentance that is rooted in Jesus as the Christ. As those new believers join the mission of the church, they become not only recipients of the gospel, but they also perpetuate its spread. This idea seems to be the catalyst for viewing Western culture as a mission field, as Stults concludes:

[Newbigin] describes the manner in which a person in our culture is drawn to Christ by observing the church, which is indwelling the truth of Christ as revealed in the Bible. It is in the indwelling of the story that the church truly acts like a church and then becomes the conduit for God’s grace to culture. This process is initiated by the Holy Spirit who leads a person to believe in Christ. The convert then becomes a part of that community which indwells the story and that community nurtures the convert in the story. It is both spiritual and cognitive

---

<sup>11</sup> Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson. *On The Verge*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Michael W. Goheen, “A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task,” in *The End of Theology: Shaping Theology for the Sake of Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 30.

nurturing, where the convert exchanges the previously unredeemed worldview for a true view of reality, which radically changes the convert's life and thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Missional theology can therefore be seen as a process of building on the indwelling of God's story within the church, leading to life transformation as the story nurtures each person. Much like the work and ministry of the early Methodist movement, reaching unchurched people with the gospel leads to life transformation that invites converts to become sharers of the gospel themselves.

### *Jesus As Lord*

The affirmation and confession of the early church that Jesus is Lord is central to the mission of God. Newbigin recognized this in his reading of Scripture and came to understand that confession is an affirmation that would subsequently “. . . clash with the *cultus publicus* of the empire.”<sup>15</sup> In so doing the early church made its mark as a community formed with a mission, centered on the authority of Jesus. The confession that Jesus is Lord, according to Newbigin would signal the thrust of the Christian mission “. . . to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all.”<sup>16</sup> The authority of Jesus then becomes the main obligation for the whole of the missionary movement. For Newbigin, the question of authority not only rests on Jesus but “. . . is not to be answered by trying to demonstrate the usefulness of missions for some purpose that can be accepted apart from the ultimate commitment upon which the

---

<sup>14</sup> Stults, “Putting Newbigin in Perspective,” 234.

<sup>15</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17.

missionary enterprise rests.”<sup>17</sup> Basically the mission is the answer, and to Newbigin to ask the question of authority is to invite conversation on who Jesus is.

The mission of the church, however, would not always be met with open arms and ready ears, as culture has its own way of responding to calls of conversion and allegiance to realms not of this world. Newbigin was no stranger to this reality, and as Stults observes, Newbigin may have been more keenly aware of this fact in that he may have welcomed suffering as fulfillment of the mission of the church. To this point, Stults writes

While human individual freedom is one of the gifts of the Enlightenment, taken in its most radical form, it can become an unreasonable tyrant that can destroy culture by destroying other freedoms and by creating chaos in culture as individual autonomous persons exercise their personal rights with little consideration for others. To witness may be construed to be a form of coercion, as inhibiting the freedom of persons who are not Christian, and therefore viewed as intolerant.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the risk associated with a witness of the gospel, Newbigin remains committed to the call upon his life as not just his own. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, we read “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me” (1 Cor. 9:16-17 [New International Version]). This passage of Scripture informed Newbigin’s understanding of God’s call to share in the mission with other believers, writing “It is committed to me. I am simply the messenger entrusted with this responsibility to deliver

---

<sup>17</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Stults, *Putting Newbigin in Perspective*, 236-237.

the message.”<sup>19</sup> The message, according to Newbigin is a message that is lived out in a way that points to Jesus as the supreme authority. The Christian mission is then understood as being lived out “. . . in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Re-aligning Church and Mission*

For theologians like Darrell Guder, understanding the term “missional” takes on a structural role in the process of missions, much like scaffolding which “. . . is holding up our ecclesiology, or theology, our interpretation of Scripture, and our theological education.”<sup>21</sup> He observes the interrelatedness of each area in the church as it stems from a missional identity, leading to “an ecclesiology that sees its missional identity as central to its being; a theology that works out the implications of this identity to form the church for its vocation; and a hermeneutic that reads Scripture as a record and tool of God’s mission, in and through his people.”<sup>22</sup> This view is consistent with Newbigin’s view of the role of mission as a propelling force, leading events to what he calls “their true end.”<sup>23</sup>

However, Guder and many others agree that there would be no need for this scaffolding if the church were living into the *Missio Dei* as our biblical vocation.<sup>24</sup> The

---

<sup>19</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Goheen, “A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task,” 4.

<sup>22</sup> Goheen, “A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task,” 8.

<sup>23</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Goheen, “A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task,” 4.

work of Leonardo Boff, supports Guder's observation as Boff observes the circular model of Christian community, noting that "any hierarchical structure occurring within the community is for the good of the community."<sup>25</sup> Newbigin places this problem of vocational identity within the framework of the historical context of Western Christian tradition, recognizing that the separation of the church from its mission is antithetical to that identity - "With the radical secularization of Western culture, the struggles through which the younger churches born of Western missions have had to pass in order to graduate from "mission" to "church" have forced the older churches to recognize that this separation of church from mission is theologically indefensible."<sup>26</sup>

Separating church from mission is not only antithetical to the identity of the church but raises questions about the validity of the mission in the first place, especially from outsiders. Newbigin observed that adherents of faiths outside Christianity regularly ask questions of validity and authority, leading voices within Christianity to postulate questions of validity as well.<sup>27</sup> Newbigin doesn't dismiss these questions as invalid but sees them as a way to bring others to an understanding of the Christian faith, by realigning the church's understanding of missional theology.

In response to questions of authority, Newbigin offers a corrective that suggests a recovery of church as mission, especially as it relates to the commitments of the church - "The question of authority is not to be answered by trying to demonstrate the usefulness of missions for some purpose that can be accepted apart from the ultimate commitment

---

<sup>25</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), Chapter 5.

<sup>26</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 13.

upon which the missionary enterprise rests.”<sup>28</sup> This commitment, according to Newbigin is the authority of Jesus, not understood as being derived from some outside source, but as the very authority of God – “Because the authority of Jesus is ultimate, the recognition of it involves a commitment that replaces all other commitments.”<sup>29</sup>

If missional theology is driven by the commitment of the church to the authority of Jesus, then it makes sense for the church to live from this commitment. Missional theology, therefore not only points to the significance of mission in the life of the church, but informs the vocation of ministry in all areas of congregational life with the authority of Jesus as the primary commitment. This understanding is essential if the church is to recover an effective understanding of missional theology.

Where then does tradition fit into the conversation on the role of the church and missional theology? Newbigin was not against tradition, or even traditional expressions of church. In fact, it is in the community that Newbigin places a great deal of emphasis. Weston observes that “Newbigin welcomes the notion of “tradition,” seeing it not as some heavy or burdensome weight or obstacle that might somehow impede the possibility of progress but as the inescapable and foundational context in which all true knowing and learning takes place.”<sup>30</sup> Kärkkäinen further observes that Newbigin’s view of the church as truth-seeking community is built on tradition and authority.<sup>31</sup> This foundation allows the church to view the world through the perspective of the gospel

---

<sup>28</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Weston, “Newbigin and the Critique of Modernity,” in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 144.

<sup>31</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Mission and Postmodernities*, 100.

rather than through culture. Newbigin's understanding of tradition is then seen as being quite unmodern, especially as it relates to the knowledge of God. According to Weston, Newbigin's approach to understanding the knowledge of God "... is not an object of discovery, or a conclusion reached by deduction, but rather a calling to obedience, or a stewardship of trust."<sup>32</sup>

### *Missional Theology and Scripture*

Newbigin's view of the Bible is that it is not only unique among other sacred books, but that the uniqueness of the Bible itself provides revelation to understanding the cosmos:

It claims to show us the shape, the structure, the origin, and the goal not merely of human history, but of cosmic history. It does not accept a view of nature as imply the arena upon which the drama of human history is played out. Much less does it seek the secret of the individual's true being within the self - a self for which the public history of the world can have no ultimate significance. Rather it sees the history of the nations and the history of nature within the large framework of God's history - the carrying forward to its completion of the gracious propose that has its source in the love of the Father for the Son in the unity of the Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Newbigin describes the God of the Bible as patient, loving, forgiving, and possessing the power to resurrect. The evolution of the story in the Bible takes place as God seeks to bring blessing upon the world God created. Newbigin views the revelation of Scripture as a process of selection to "the few" who are chosen to share with "the many."<sup>34</sup> Ultimately leading to Jesus as the primary bearer of God's purposes in redeeming creation, Newbigin understands the mission of God as drawing close to what

---

<sup>32</sup> Weston, *Newbigin and the Critique of Modernity*, 144-145.

<sup>33</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 32-33.

God created. “The announcement means that this fact is no longer something remote - far up in the heavens or far away in the future. It is an impending reality, in fact. the one great reality that confronts men and women now with the need for decision.”<sup>35</sup>

For Goheen, missional theology relies on the identity of the church as defined in the role it plays in the story of God. The Bible is not only a record of God’s missional activity, but also serves as a product and tool of God’s missional purposes.<sup>36</sup> This aligns with Newbigin’s view of the proclamation of God’s reign in the Bible as “the hidden reality by which the public history of humankind is to be understood.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Missional Theology in Fresh Expressions of Church*

Recovering a missional theology in the church requires a return to the primary goal of the Christian movement, rooted in Jesus as the primary commitment. Just as Newbigin and others have suggested, maintaining rootedness in Jesus and his mission is essential if the church is to recover a theology of mission that reflects Jesus himself. Michael Beck, referencing leadership guru Simon Sinek reminds us that the local church sometimes forgets why it exists and that recovering the missional purpose of why the church exists is the first step toward recovering the true mission of the church.<sup>38</sup> For Goheen, the recovery of a missional identity for the church means a transformation in theology, theological education, the life of the church, and reading Scripture.<sup>39</sup> Yet, there

---

<sup>35</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Goheen, *A Missional Approach to Scripture*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches*, 88-89.

<sup>39</sup> Goheen, “A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task,” 8.



is much more than a missional theology encompasses, especially when one considers that mission is in the DNA of the church, just as mission is in the DNA of God. Mission is not a means to another end, nor is mission a subset of theology, but a missional theology that reflects the nature of God that is experienced when the church joins God in God's mission.

Joining God in God's mission to the world is a key characteristic of fresh expressions of church. A return to the main commitment of the church is critical for new Christian movements to reach an increasingly unchurched world. Fresh expressions of church, in which inherited, traditional forms of church and new forms of church exist side by side, are dependent upon a healthy missional theology. Recently, digital fresh expressions reach into a space that is constantly evolving and transforming, leading to a mission field that is more fluid and less consistent. Both in person and digital fresh expressions of church require a missional theology that recognizes the commitment to Jesus as authority along with being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit to reach new people in new places. Highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the missional movement among Christians in fresh expressions movements, Michael Moynagh writes:

Wherever the Spirit is active in personal lives, in social and political developments, in the [behavior] of men and women whether followers of Christ or not, the church is called to throw its weight behind what the Spirit is doing. It does this not only by supporting the Spirit's work in the world, but also by offering the gospel of salvation and inviting people into its communal life with Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 129.

A recovery of church as mission, and a recalibration of the vocation of mission are characteristics of Newbigin's missional theology. The work of the church through fresh expressions is in part a recovery of this mission as well. Recognizing the importance of building sustainable relationships in spaces where people are already gathering is a hallmark of the fresh expressions movement. In the digital environment, an opportunity exists for the church to be on mission as the church is present in tangible ways. However, the challenge is found in convincing the local church that valid ministry can take shape in the digital frontier. When the church grasps the vocational identity of mission, the momentum from such a shift in thinking drives the church forward and propels it toward recovery of authentic relationships as central to ministry. In the digital space, this translates to reaching digital natives and otherwise unchurched people and inviting them to be part of the mission themselves.

As stated earlier, missional theology is driven by development of relationships that transcend traditional boundaries, is unashamedly Christ-centered, and insists on Jesus as authority. Building a foundation for a theology that leads to life transformation requires the church to return to this understanding of mission. In a world that is becoming increasingly post-Christian, the work of engaging in meaningful ministry that connects through authentic relationships is of utmost importance. Learning to embrace digitality and venturing into the digital frontier to expand the mission of the local church is to bring the love of God and the authority of Jesus to these spaces. A missional theology that empowers the church to see questions from outsiders as invitation rather than a threat, an opportunity rather than opposition, is a theology that embraces the possibilities of mission in the digital frontier.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

#### *Introduction*

In a society that is becoming increasingly post-Christian and culturally distant, the church struggles to adequately respond to the needs of those outside the walls.<sup>1</sup>

Combined with a general aversion to embracing emerging methods and technologies for reaching unchurched people with the gospel, the local church misses out on opportunities to develop and foster meaningful relationships with the unchurched and de-churched.<sup>2</sup>

Moynagh observes this challenge and recognizes that the transcendent focus of churches alone does not seem to provide the connection sought by those outside the walls, detecting that “many people still connect with ‘thin spaces’, including birth, marriage and death, where earth and heaven brush closely by each other.”<sup>3</sup> This space “where earth and heaven brush closely by each other” is sacred space, where God is present, and where meaningful connection can take place. In a world seeking authenticity and non-pat answers, Christianity offers a richness of resources in its tradition, building a bridge

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge : A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 72.

<sup>2</sup> The terms “unchurched” and “de-churched” are terms used to describe levels of church involvement. “unchurched” are people who have never been to church, except for funerals or weddings. “de-churched” is used to describe people who, at one point were part of a church. For more on this, see Church House Publishing, *Mission-Shaped Church* (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2004), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 86.

between transcendent belief and practical theology. This intersectionality of transcendence and practicality is where the bedrock of fresh expressions take root.

Social theory and the broader work of sociology bring a heightened understanding to the relationship between persons and places, more specifically with regard to the interactions that take place within and among various environments. In what has come to be known as the “network society,” complex organizations discover ways to transcend the challenges of centralized systems by becoming less hierarchical and more flexible while retaining effectiveness. The “space of flows” refers to a reconfiguring of spatial recognition, suggesting that place or space is not just physical but integrative, inter-relational, and non-hierarchical.<sup>4</sup> For Castells, the space of flows “represents the material arrangements that allow for simultaneity of social practices without territorial congruity.”<sup>5</sup>

As culture further embraces digitality and ventures further into the digital frontier, the local church struggles to see validity in the online environment. Citing the lack of “real” connection, the local church hesitates to embrace the digital space as valid for building meaningful connections. However, the theory of the space of flows provides a framework for understanding the reality of a decentralized Christian community that is also rooted in the authority of Jesus. As the local church embraces this reality and begins to accept digital space as valid, the space of flows can quickly become a space where Christian community brings transformation in physical and online spaces.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ray Hutchison, “Spaces of Flows,” *Encyclopedia of urban studies*, Vol 1 Sage Publications Inc., 2010. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Castells, “Grassrooting the Space of Flows,” *Urban Geography* 20, no. 4 (May 2013), 294.

*Network Society, Space of Flows and Theological Foundations*

Manuel Castells is known for his work in studying social movements, later incorporating cross-cultural perspectives that bring depth to his understandings of social theory. His breadth of interest and study span from high-tech industrial firms to the geography of economic development, and analysis of information technology.<sup>6</sup> Castells contends that in order to understand the world more fully in economics, business, technology, and culture, we need a new understanding of interaction through a new theoretical perspective, namely the network society.<sup>7</sup>

The focus on the work surrounding space of flows centers more on economics and urban development, but reaches into relationships of people and places within those structures. For the Christian community, embracing the space of flows seems to be a natural fit as the desire for practical theology can be met by the church's vast resources throughout its traditions, while connection with the desire for learning spiritual truth takes place among more transcendent, spiritual avenues.

Missional theology serves as a solid foundation for recovering the mission-drive that is the center of Christian evangelistic efforts. Just as the space of flows builds connection between people and places, missional theology builds bridges of understanding and strengthening of relationships within the structures of culture and society. Missional theology is driven by relationship development, transcending the restrictive boundaries of the liberal/conservative debate, and is unashamedly Christ-centered, building a foundation for a theology that leads to life transformation. In the

---

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Castells and Martin Ince, *Conversations with Manuel Castells*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xix.

space of flows, the missional paradigm is presented new opportunities for meaningful connection and discovery of methods for engaging culture outside the walls of the church. In the digital frontier, this means that the church has an opportunity to discover meaningful connection beyond what has traditionally been understood as the space of place. Moynagh observes that “As more ecclesial life takes place in networks, the church has an opportunity to redeem the space of flows- to show what this space might be like if it was under the lordship of Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Imagine what it would be like for the church to take seriously the call of Jesus to be salt and light throughout the world, to include the digital spaces where social networks are already taking root.

For Newbigin, the call to be salt and light in the world is a call he took seriously. Newbigin’s theology of mission can be seen as the intersection of faith in Jesus and a life lived in relation to that faith. For Newbigin, a commitment to the authority of Jesus is central to the effectiveness of Christian mission and missional theology. At the same time, context for Newbigin is important and translating the gospel message in a culturally appropriate way is of primary concern. The formation of Castells’ network society and an understanding of the interactions within that network serve as a paradigm for Christian communities today. A Christ-centered, community minded approach to theology and mission exists comfortably within an understanding of the network society insofar as the church is willing to do the work necessary to keep Christ at the center.

Returning to the main commitment of the church, primarily of Jesus as Lord is critical for new Christian movements to reach an increasingly unchurched world. Fresh expressions of church, in which inherited, traditional forms of church and new forms of

---

<sup>8</sup> Moynagh and Harrold, *Church in Every Context*, 90.

church exist side by side, are dependent upon a healthy missional theology. Within the network society, building meaningful connection and cultivating space for sharing ideas is a primary goal. As digital fresh expressions reach into a space that is constantly evolving and transforming, the mission field itself is becoming more fluid and less consistent. A missional theology that recognizes the commitment to Jesus as authority along with being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit to reach new people in new places is vital in the network society. And, as the space of flows continues to transform the way people connect with one another, maintaining a solid foundation with a healthy missional theology is vital.

### *The Network Society and Biblical Foundations*

Identifying the reluctance of Castells to define terms, especially as they relate to the network society and spaces of flows, Cavanagh explores networks and social theory as researched by other scholars, however she maintains that it remains difficult to ascertain what is meant by a ‘network’ in the network society, yet she also points out Castells’ use of “flows” as being more comparable to the structures he mentions while discussing networks.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Don Robotham observes Castells’ juxtapositions as he “[Frequently resorts] to metaphorical language which annoys many writers, . . . spring[ing] precisely from this profoundly romantic anti-capitalist orientation which drives his entire work.”<sup>10</sup> Castells seems to recognize this ambiguity in aiding readers to understand the differences between space of places and space of flows via his theory of

---

<sup>9</sup> Allison Cavanagh. *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2007. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Don Robotham, Network Society Theory, in *Culture, Society and Economy: Bringing Production Back In*, (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 2.

urbanism in the Information Age. Castells states “This conceptualization has been widely discussed although not always understood, probably due to the obscurity of my formulation.”<sup>11</sup>

Connecting the space of flows with biblical foundations, primarily that of the early church in the Book of Acts, takes the understanding of these definitions to a more practical level. The missional focus of Acts, as witnessed through the inclusion of Gentiles, points to God’s work in preparing the church to expand and develop within the context of culture and formation of Christian community. In the narrative of the believers in Antioch, we see Gentiles persuaded to become followers of God with faith in Jesus as the story unfolds into Luke’s understanding of the diaspora mission. In a sense, the story of the early church serves as an example of transition from space of place to space of flows. As the mission of the church expands beyond Jerusalem and enters Antioch, there is a networked connection with the inherited church in Jerusalem that, while still calling the shots, takes a more passive role in allowing the Antiochian expression to take root. This was an unprecedented move, one that required a great deal of risk taking and faith as the early church listened to the Spirit of God. It is interesting to see the established network taking new rootedness beyond Jerusalem as the missionary focus is transformed to Antioch.

Early on in Castells’ work, he was criticized for leaning heavily upon Marxist ideas, as pointed out by Marko Ampuja. She opines that Castells’ work was “Wholly Marxist in its foundations, using such familiar categories as “extraction of surplus value” and “falling rate of profit” to chart the question of what kind of problems capitalism, as a

---

<sup>11</sup> Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, xxxi.



social system based on exploitation and class division, faced in terms of its reproduction and long-term social legitimation.”<sup>12</sup> His later works (post 1980) signaled an end to this period, especially as Castells began to focus more upon social movements.

As the church learns to expand its ministry beyond the inherited structures, like those of the early church headquartered in Jerusalem, an exponential shift will begin to occur. The church in Antioch experienced transformational growth as the Spirit empowered unlikely people (gentiles) to become part of the mission of Jesus. In the space of flows, the likelihood of new followers of Jesus becoming the best spokespersons for the love of God is within reach. The issues addressed by Castells with regard to class division and problems placed upon social systems are similar to the Kingdom of God goals found in Scripture. As the church embraces digitality and ministry takes shape in the space of flows, the church becomes decentralized and mission becomes a diaspora mission, emphasizing the role of believers of all stripes.

### *The Network Society and John Wesley – Historical Foundations*

Castells’ theory on the space of flows has far-reaching implications for understanding hierarchical structures and their effects on systems within the structure. Most notably, Castells’ space of flows is understood in the context of urban development. Earlier, we were introduced to Hutchison’s understanding of the space of flows as a reconfiguring of spatial recognition, understanding that place or space is not just physical but integrative, inter-relational, and non-hierarchical.<sup>13</sup> As the world becomes more

---

<sup>12</sup> Marko Ampuja. *Theorizing Globalization: A Critique of the Mediatization of Social Theory*, BRILL Pro-Quest E-Book Central, 2012. 124-25.

<sup>13</sup> Hutchison, *Spaces of Flows*, 2.

mobile and the scope and size of economic transactions within the mobile world increase, the size of flows increase as well. For Hutchison, this means that cities in a network society, connected through a space of flows, experience direct links with other cities, bypassing the hierarchical order of scale with regard to larger regional areas and urban centers.<sup>14</sup> This transition to an integrative, non-hierarchical, and inter-relational system of development leads to greater autonomy in these smaller systems.

There is a challenge however, to the space of flows within an urban context, as Hutchison observes, “The effects of the space of flows are socially and materially uneven—thus while there has been an enormous effort to reduce barriers to flows of capital, there are rather more barriers for flows of people.”<sup>15</sup> This may be part of Cavanagh’s critical observation that while Castells’ network society involves personal connections, a breadth of technologies, places, and functions, there remain elements that are only selectively connected to the network.<sup>16</sup> Contrasted with social networks, which are more personal oriented, the network society is global in nature and, according to Cavanagh is patterned by global imperatives that serve to “. . .perpetuate and further the interests of the elite.”<sup>17</sup>

John Wesley and the early Methodists found themselves contrasting with the network society as Cavanagh understands it. Wesley found himself preaching among the common people, not those who would seek to further the interest of the elite. The proliferation of Methodist classes and bands enabled people to experience life together

<sup>14</sup> Hutchison, *Spaces of Flows*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Hutchison, *Spaces of Flows*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Cavanagh, *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Cavanagh, *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, 40.

with a uniting bond of seeking God. Field preaching enabled common, everyday people to hear the gospel proclaimed. Each of these methods for reaching people with the gospel resulted in the hearers becoming the sharers. The boundaries of class and social strata were broken down as Christians of varying socioeconomic status would gather in a class meeting, in a field to hear a Methodist preacher, or in a small band to experience sanctification.

Conversion and spiritual formation practices in the days of Wesley were viewed as a process and not simply one-time events. Many times, these conversions and spiritual experiences took place in areas outside the walls of the church, among networks much like the social networks that involve personal connections that were more inclusive in nature. Interestingly enough, these interactions were seen by the Church of England as antithetical to the mission they envisioned as Wesley was not engaging with the class of people the Church would expect. In a sense, this is a case of the elite being brought to a new reality. For the Church of England, this new reality was an understanding that the gospel was to be proclaimed to all people, and not just those would fill the coffers.

Standing in contrast to Castells' understanding of the network society is the understanding of Hardt and Negri. Cavanagh observes that while Castells' networks themselves are particular, goal oriented, and exclusionary, Hardt and Negri's networks are seen as inclusive and pluralistic.<sup>18</sup> Castells' networks are seen as more institutionally-focused, where certain elements are only selectively connected to the network, whereas Hardt and Negri's network enable action on the part of individual components, leaving space for various intentions. Boundaries take on a new structure as well in Hardt and

---

<sup>18</sup> Cavanagh, *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, 41.

Negri's network as boundaries are no longer seen as defensible, physical boundaries and the rise of a network enemy takes shape, requiring a different type of network boundary, with no central power.<sup>19</sup>

Again, we can see a connection with early Methodism as boundaries took on new structure among the people called Methodist and among the common people of the day. The stages of Christian formation experienced by early Methodists continued to encourage participation in class meetings as foundational for evangelistic and catechetical means while the work of field preaching continued to develop and become one of the hallmarks of the Methodist movement to bring new people to faith in Christ. In the process, those brought to faith through field preaching would become participants in class meetings, leading to experiences of conversion as a response to the teaching of dedicated class leaders.<sup>20</sup> This innovative, missional, and contextual process was innovative for Wesley's day as network boundaries were redrawn, and power decentralized as accountability in small groups became the norm.

### *The Space of Flows and Fresh Expressions*

As vertical, hierarchical forms of communication become less prominent, horizontal networks, in the form of mass networks are on the rise. This shift, according to Castells has led to a decentralization of the institution as a communication center. As a result, mass media messages now inform opinion, not through explicit messages but absence of content. To this point Castells writes "What does not exist in the media does

---

<sup>19</sup> Cavanagh, *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Hardt, 16.

not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds.”<sup>21</sup> This observation suggests that messages through mass media, political or otherwise, have an effect in that what is not projected, is not worthy of investigating.

While the church is very different than business and the structures of a globalized market, there are many ways in which the church can learn from research and insight into the space of flows. Castells contends that networks enhance physical life, allowing people to experience a rootedness beyond their space of place. For the church, this means discovering space where commonalities exist and people gather naturally. This is the space where ministry can take shape. Moynagh argues that the ‘Local’ church can experience longevity because life for most people is centralized to a particular locality, yet the church can have an existence through networks and geography.<sup>22</sup> No longer is someone required to be geographically present in order to experience Christian community. With the increase in embracing digitality and availability of accessing online environments, the local church can leverage technology to reach new people in new spaces. This also means that the physical obstacles to participating in ministry are removed, allowing for the opportunity of differently abled persons to participate in Christian community.

Often, the local church gets caught up in programmatic methods to address decline and evangelism efforts. Combined with a general aversion to embracing emerging methods and technologies for reaching unchurched people with the gospel, the local church misses out on opportunities to develop and foster meaningful relationships with

---

<sup>21</sup> Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power, and Counter-Power in the Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 1, (2007), 241.

<sup>22</sup> Moynagh and Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 91.

those outside the church. Embracing the space of flows and an understanding of the vital nature of network societies enables the local church to see digital interaction as meaningful and valid.

The natural propensity for American culture to readily embrace technology and digitization while the local church hesitates and struggles to see the possibilities, deepens the divide among churched and unchurched persons. This division of churched and unchurched is further exacerbated as technology continues to develop and chart new courses while methods of evangelism primarily employed by the local church fail to leverage the use of technology to effectively connect with the unchurched. Learning to embrace digitality and online space as a valid environment for meaningful connection will enable the local church to engage ministry in new and effective ways.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

For churches who desire to reach unchurched persons in an ever-changing world, the tools and methods to do so seem out of reach or unattainable without large budgets, pools of volunteers, or tech-savvy leaders. An openness to embracing digital space as a valid avenue of ministry enables connection with digital natives through fresh expressions and leads to meaningful connection with unchurched people in digital and physical spaces. It is my hypothesis that if the local church embraces digitality, they will be equipped to lead online fresh expressions that effectively reach unchurched people. My project, “Ministry on the Digital Frontier” is an attempt to equip the local church by empowering people to embrace digitality as a space for meaningful connection with unchurched people.

This project is the culmination of my work in several foundations areas, to include biblical foundations, historical foundations, theological foundations, and interdisciplinary foundations. Beginning with the foundation of Scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts 11:19-30 empowers the church in Antioch to embrace the gentile believers among them, eliciting a response from the inherited church in Jerusalem and resulting in the spread of the gospel. Then, a look into early Methodism and the leadership of John Wesley provides a foundation for innovative ministry practices that reach beyond the

walls of the local church. From field preaching to classes and bands, John Wesley's desire to see lives transformed by the gospel leads to the formation of a movement that continues to innovate and inspire growth among God's people. Next is the missional theology of Lesslie Newbigin, focused on the centrality of Jesus as Lord and the intersection of faith in Jesus with our everyday lives. Missional theology is intentional relationship, lived out in meaningful ways that point to Jesus. The online world has much to explore when it comes to opportunities for sharing the gospel. And, finally the work of Manuel Castels and the network society within the space of flows provides a framework for the church to engage in meaningful connection with those outside the walls. Leveraging the use of technology to break down barriers and connect people with one another in ways that contribute to an ever-increasing number of decentralized networks and nodes that multiply much like the early church brings the foundations modules full circle.

### **Methodology**

For this project, I designed and implemented five ninety to one hundred and twenty-minute sessions designed to fill the knowledge gap of digitality and online fresh expressions as well as to elicit conversation among participants regarding their confidence to lead online fresh expressions. Each weekly module included time for five-minute breaks to take place once per hour. The workshop culminated in a sixth week that included individual personal interviews. Because the workshop focused on the critical role of building meaningful relationships, group discussion and personal interviews were



chosen as the best method for participants to share their experiences and learning throughout the project. Workshop modules were organized in the following way:

- Week 1: Pre-Workshop Questionnaires and Introduction to Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions
- Week 2: Biblical Foundations and Group Discussion #1
- Week 3: Historical Foundations and Group Discussion #2
- Week 4: Theological Foundations and Group Discussion #3
- Week 5: Interdisciplinary Foundations and Post-Workshop Questionnaires
- Week 6: Individual Interviews

The introductory session took place during week one of the six-week project duration, providing an overview of digitality and online fresh expressions. The introductory session provided time to complete pre-workshop questionnaires and acquaint participants with one another. The second workshop session focused on a recap of the introductory session and facilitated teaching with group conversation on the biblical foundation of Acts 11:19-30. Week three invited participants to reflect on the previous module and allowed for facilitation of the historical foundation module, based on John Wesley's innovative approaches in early Methodism to reach beyond the walls of the church. In the fourth week, the missional theology of Lesslie Newbigin provided the foundation for conversation and teaching within the theological foundation module.

The final teaching session was executed during the fifth week of the workshop. Sessions two, three, and four concluded with focused group discussion, based on questions shared at the beginning of each session. Week five's focus on teaching within the scope of the space of flows and the network society was planned as a knowledge-

based module and did not include focused group discussion questions. Week six was planned to facilitate focused individual interviews for each participant, allowing participants to share their experiences and learnings from each session, providing me with useful data to evaluate whether a change is indicated in knowledge and confidence level.

The workshop sessions and interviews took place in person at Durand First UMC, in the church café. The Zoom online video conferencing platform was provided as an alternative venue in the case of illness or other unforeseen circumstances. The use of the church cafe for the workshops and interviews allowed for a consistent environment free of distraction and ensured all participants could share openly during group discussion. Each session was held during the week in the evening in order to allow for the greatest number of participants and ensure there were no other groups in the building to distract from learning and conversation. Additionally, a large television monitor, external webcam, laptop, and microphone were available during each session in order to facilitate communications in an effective manner if a participant was unable to attend in person. The television monitor was used to present PowerPoint slides to aid in the presentation of each week's material. Handouts of the slides for each week were provided to participants as each session began. Participants were asked to compile their notes and slide handouts to reference later during individual interviews.

The goal was to collect and evaluate data from three data points: 1) Pre and post-workshop questionnaires for workshop participants, 2) Focused group discussions during each session, and 3) Focused interviews with each participant. These data points were selected as the goal of my project was to evaluate both knowledge and confidence in

participants with relation to digitality and online fresh expressions. The pre and post-workshop questionnaires were designed to evaluate participant knowledge of and confidence in leading online fresh expressions with the goal of observing notable change in both domains over the course of the workshop. The focused group discussions were designed to elicit conversation based on the particular module and were used in conjunction with the questionnaires to observe a change in knowledge and confidence of participants. Finally, the focused individual interviews were designed to give participants an opportunity to share whether they experienced change in knowledge and increase in confidence through subjective feedback. The pre and post-workshop questionnaires, along with personal interview forms, were coded with letters A through F and corresponded to one another so as to evaluate any relationship between pre and post-workshop responses. This also ensured that participants retained their confidentiality throughout the project.

Participants were chosen from among members, constituents, and attendees of Durand First UMC. Potential participants were chosen by direct invitation from context associates and myself in addition to printed and digital bulletin and newsletter announcements. Potential participants could indicate their interest through email, phone, printed and digital connect cards, and in-person response. Participants were drawn primarily from the Sunday morning worship service and Monday evening dinner church, however anybody with a connection to the church was invited to participate. The goal was to execute the workshop with twelve participants, in order to allow for a reliable sample size and ensure that individual interviews could be conducted in a timely manner. The Durand First UMC leadership team provided authorization and support of the project.

The pre and post-workshop questionnaires were designed to gauge participant knowledge of digitality and online fresh expressions, their perceptions of how effective Durand First UMC is to engage ministry in online space, and participant confidence to lead online fresh expressions. Group discussion was designed to facilitate the opportunity for exploration into foundations for understanding digitality and online fresh expressions, including continuous feedback, and providing a platform for creative approaches to ministry in digital spaces. The final week of the project consisted of individual interviews, allowing participants to share about their experience in the workshop and to indicate potential growth in their knowledge base.

Two contextual associates met with me throughout every phase of the project and actively participated in the workshop. Context associates were chosen to provide feedback and support for workshop design, development of questionnaires, and tabulation of questionnaire data following the final session. Contextual associates also provided feedback after the workshop ended. Professional associates assisted me as I created the project, implemented the workshop designs, and formulated questionnaires. They also provided professional insight into my findings along the way. The professional associates asked questions to probe my thinking and offer insight throughout the duration of the project.

### **Implementation**

As stated earlier, the goal of this project was to increase participant awareness and knowledge of digital ministry and online fresh expressions while also contributing to overall confidence in order to cultivate online fresh expressions that reach beyond the

local church. A total of six people participated in the workshop, with four attending all five weekly learning sessions. The two participants who did not attend all the sessions in person were able to participate via Zoom during the session they missed. All participants completed the individual interview during week six. The first four teaching sessions ended up taking between one and a half to two hours each week, to include focused group discussion and breaks. The fifth teaching module, that did not include focused group discussion questions was about ninety minutes in length, including breaks. Each week generally followed a similar format that included a recap of previous sessions, facilitation of group discussion, and question & answer time, along with one five-minute break every hour. Each of the teaching sessions included a PowerPoint presentation to aid in the delivery of content and to highlight key points for participants. The PowerPoint slides were provided in notes-handout form to participants at the beginning of each session. Participants were instructed to bring any completed notes from previous sessions to subsequent sessions in order to facilitate greater understanding of the material.

#### *Workshop Module 1: Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions*

The first workshop module introduced participants to digitality and online fresh expressions. After a brief welcome to the workshop, participants were instructed to take the first twenty minutes to complete the informed consent form and pre-workshop questionnaire. When participants completed these documents, they were invited to keep their pre-workshop questionnaire until the completion of the first session. The informed consent forms were placed in a folder and at the completion of the first session, stored in a locked drawer in my church office. Keeping their questionnaires in hand for this session

allowed participants to reference their questionnaire in order to ask questions with regard to the introductory material. Twenty minutes were available at the end of the session in order to allow participants to share their responses to pre-workshop questionnaires. The lesson plan for the first session was structured as follows:

- 10 minutes for welcome and to collect consent forms.
- 10 minutes for completion of pre-workshop questionnaires.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 50 minutes for lesson on "Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions" module.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 20 minutes for optional sharing of pre-workshop responses and for question & answers.

After participants returned from the first break, an introduction to fresh expressions video from the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church was played.<sup>1</sup> In this video, several examples of fresh expressions were highlighted and individuals shared their experiences of fresh expressions as a way to reach unchurched people. Immediately following the video, I asked the participants to think of something from the video that stood out for them and to record that thought to be shared during the group discussion time.

Following the video, participants were invited to consider a definition of the blended ecology, proposed by Dr. Michael Beck - "The blended ecology refers to fresh expressions of church in symbiotic relationship with inherited forms of church in such a

---

<sup>1</sup> Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, "What is Fresh Expressions?" FLUMC, February 1, 2018, YouTube video, 3:12. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd5QGM9\\_xX8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd5QGM9_xX8).

way that the combining of these modes over time merge to create a nascent form.”<sup>2</sup>

Utilizing a Venn diagram to explore the mixed ecology as a space where the inherited church and fresh expressions of church exist, participants were then invited to think about ministries they had been a part of that took place within the space of the blended ecology.

The fresh expressions segment continued with a conversation on attractional, engaged, and incarnational models of ministry that often comprise a church’s missional approach to reach unchurched people. These three arenas of missional focus were then explored as a whole, combining to form a multi-faceted approach to reaching people through the inherited church model. From this point, participants were encouraged to consider where fresh expressions of church could form from the foundations of these three areas of missional focus. From this point, participants were then introduced to the four principles of fresh expressions: listening, service, contextual mission, and making disciples.<sup>3</sup>

The fresh expressions segment of the introductory session then transitioned to a conversation on digitality and the possibilities within online space to form new Christian communities based on the foundations of fresh expressions. Following a discussion on the role of technology in changing culture, the emphasis of relationship building in physical and online space was presented. The first workshop session concluded with a

---

<sup>2</sup> Beck and Acevedo, *Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*, Location 321

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the Fresh Expressions U.K. website - <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/what-is-fx/fx-values/>.

YouTube video that introduced participants to an example of online ministry through VR Church.<sup>4</sup>

*Workshop Module 2: Biblical Foundations for Ministry on the Digital Frontier*

The second workshop module began with a check-in to allow participants to share any residual thoughts from what was learned the week prior. Following the check-in and brief review of the previous session's material, the biblical foundation module commenced. Utilizing Acts 11:19-30 as the biblical text, participants were invited to explore the biblical foundation for understanding online fresh expressions and the implications of digitality for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Participants were given discussion questions at the beginning of the session and were invited to share their responses to each question in a group conversation format. The lesson plan for the second module was structured as follows:

- 20 minutes for welcome and review of week 1 content.
- 30 minutes for "Biblical Foundations" module.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for "Biblical Foundations" module conclusion.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for group discussion.

The initial lesson plan placed group discussion at the end of the module. However, during preparation of the PowerPoint slides for the workshop, it was apparent that group discussion would be more productive if it were to take place at intervals during the

---

<sup>4</sup> "Welcome to VR Church" VR MMO Church, November 2, 2020, YouTube video, 0:48. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Yahztu9isc>.



module. This change still allocated thirty minutes for group discussion to take place and did not negatively affect the flow of the presentation of the module material.

After reviewing the content from the introductory module on fresh expressions and digitality, participants were invited to read the text of Acts 11:19-30 for themselves. Then, participants were invited to close their eyes and hear the text read aloud. Prior to this reading of the text, participants were invited to focus on words or phrases from the text that stood out to them. After a few moments of sharing their thoughts on words or phrases from the text, the lesson proceeded with prepared PowerPoint slides highlighting important points in the text. Throughout the slides were questions that followed each segment, prompting responses based on the material presented:

- 1) Based on what we just read, in what ways is the Christian community formed in Antioch?
- 2) The church at Jerusalem, as the inherited church exists alongside and supports the expansion of the mission through Antioch. In what ways is Antioch an image of cultivating fresh expressions today?
- 3) The mission of the early church expands geographically beyond Jerusalem, but also expands culturally to include gentiles. How is this similar to the 21st century church expanding beyond its walls to reach people in digital spaces?
- 4) The people in Antioch speak many different languages, yet the church gains traction in the midst of this diversity. In what ways is this similar to the church of today learning a new “language” to connect with people in digital spaces?

- 5) God's presence and action prepares the church in Jerusalem to spread into Antioch and beyond, engaging with culture and forming Christian community. In what ways is Durand First UMC like Jerusalem? Like Antioch?
- 6) If Antioch can be compared to the digital frontier, how is Durand First UMC prepared to enter into that space?
- 7) What other questions or observations would you like to share?

As the second workshop module concluded, participants were invited to consider their level of confidence with regard to understanding fresh expressions and digitality. Participants were also reminded of the individual interviews that would take place during week six of the project. Additionally, participants were encouraged to read the text of Acts 11:19-30 on their own after participating in this module as preparation for the next session. Each participant was then given a copy of the biblical text to review prior to the next session.

### *Workshop Module 3: Historical Foundation for Ministry on the Digital Frontier*

For the third workshop module, my goal was to evaluate participant knowledge of digitality and online fresh expressions as they relate to the foundations of the early Methodist movement. This module included a review of last week's biblical foundation module, Methodist history video segments, and culminated in focused group discussion. I also invited participants to begin scheduling their individual interviews with me. Four participants scheduled their interview by the conclusion of the third workshop module. The lesson plan for the third session was designed as follows:

- 20 minutes for welcome and review of week 2 content.
- 30 minutes for "Historical Foundations" module.

- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for "Historical Foundations" module conclusion.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for group discussion.

After reviewing the biblical foundations module and allowing participants time to share their reflections gained after re-reading the biblical text, participants were introduced to the historical foundations module through a video introducing the life of John Wesley.<sup>5</sup> The lesson then included a brief summary of the formation of the Holy Club at Oxford, and John Wesley's experience of the "first rise" of Methodism. Participants were then introduced to Wesley's ministry among the Moravians, including his own experience of God's grace on his missionary journey.<sup>6</sup>

Following a five-minute break, participants were introduced to the history of field preaching through another video that highlighted John Wesley's desire to reach common people with the gospel.<sup>7</sup> I then introduced participants to the class meeting as a formative experience for the early Methodists, bridging the gap between field preaching and intentional discipleship. After re-emphasizing the goal of fresh expressions to connect with people outside the church by means of meaningful relationship, I invited participants to share their responses to the group discussion questions:

---

<sup>5</sup> "Life of John Wesley in 5 Minutes" Rediscovering Our Methodist Roots, November 6, 2017, 5:31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH6Hqu12sDk>

<sup>6</sup> "John Wesley – The Faith That Sparked the Methodist Movement" Russell Boulter, Vision Video, November 16, 2020, 15:35-17:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRRqKe3QB5c&t=938s>

<sup>7</sup> "John Wesley – The Faith That Sparked the Methodist Movement" Russell Boulter, Vision Video, November 16, 2020, 28:32-32:43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRRqKe3QB5c&t=1710s>

- 1) How is the growth of the early Methodist movement linked with building meaningful relationships?
- 2) John Wesley never intended to leave the Church of England (and he remained an Anglican priest until his death in 1791). However, he sparked a movement that reached into areas of life and culture that were largely discouraged by the larger church. How is venturing into the digital frontier like the formation of the Methodist movement?
- 3) The class meeting was a vital component of the early Methodist movement. Accountability in a small group of people invited genuine conversation and growth in spiritual maturity. In what ways do you think the class meeting of early Methodism can be revived as an online fresh expression of church today?
- 4) How is the reach of early Methodist field preaching into the space of common, ordinary people like the church of today reaching people where they are already doing life? How is it different?
- 5) What other questions or observations would you like to share?

After the focused group conversation, participants were once again reminded of the individual interviews to take place during week six. I also shared with participants that there would be a one week break between this module and the next due to a scheduling conflict. All participants agreed that the schedule change worked for them. Following a prayer of blessing, participants were dismissed.

*Workshop Module 4: Theological Foundation for Ministry on the Digital Frontier*

Workshop module four introduced participants to the missional theology of Lesslie Newbigin. After experiencing a week between the previous workshop module and the current one, considerable time was spent reviewing material from the previous three modules. Participants were invited to share any written reflections or thoughts they had considered since the last module. The lesson plan for workshop module four followed the same outline as the previous two workshop modules:

- 20 minutes for welcome and review of week 3 content.
- 30 minutes for "Theological Foundations" module.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for "Theological Foundations" module conclusion.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for group discussion.

After a twenty-minute review on the historical foundation module, I introduced participants to missional theology by illustrating the landscape for missional theology as the intersection of our everyday lives and our relationship with Jesus. Following this illustration, participants were encouraged to consider some working definitions of people who are considered to be unchurched, and those who would be considered de-churched. Participants were then encouraged to consider how embracing emerging methods for reaching unchurched and de-churched people could lead to building meaningful relationships with people outside the church.

Following a five-minute break, I welcomed participants back by introducing them to Lesslie Newbigin, highlighting his contributions to enable the church to re-envision ministry in a post-Christian era. Then, emphasizing missional theology as a movement connected with the church of the New Testament, participants were invited consider ways that missional theology contributes to the transformation of society through networks of people changed by the gospel. I concluded the teaching portion of the workshop module by teaching participants about the increase of digitization and the implications for the local church to consider what it means to be the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Participants were then invited to share their responses to the group discussion questions:

- 1) In your own words, describe your understanding of missional theology.
- 2) Missional theology is said to be driven primarily by the desire to form relationships. In what ways do you see relationships as the catalyst for effective mission engagement?
- 3) Is it possible to experience meaningful relationships with others in a digital space? Why or why not?
- 4) Lesslie Newbigin's missional theology is understood in the context of the intersection of everyday life and a relationship with Jesus Christ. In what ways does ministry in the digital frontier enhance or challenge this understanding?
- 5) Missional theology is played out as new believers join the church as converts, but also become part of the mission drive itself as they perpetuate the mission. Where have you seen this at work in the church today? How do you see this playing out in an online ministry environment?

- 6) What other questions or observations do you have about missional theology?

*Workshop Module 5: Interdisciplinary Foundation for Ministry on the Digital Frontier*

The final workshop module was designed to be an overview of the previous modules and included a segment on networks, nodes, and the space of flows as researched by Manuel Castels. The goal of this module was to weave together the previous module materials in order to engage participant learning and to enable an increase in understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions as they relate to each foundation module. Similar to previous workshop modules, the lesson plan for the final module was designed to facilitate group conversation:

- 20 minutes for welcome and review of week 4 content.
- 10 minutes for completion of post-workshop questionnaires.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for "Interdisciplinary Foundations" module.
- 5 minutes for break.
- 30 minutes for participants to ask questions and the researcher to provide feedback.

During the feedback session of this module, participants shared their perceptions of digitality and online fresh expressions through the lens of each of the previous foundation modules. Completing the post-workshop questionnaires early in the lesson plan encouraged conversation during the question-and-answer time. Context associates actively participated in this session, asking probing questions and encouraging participants to share their experiences. After the conclusion of final remarks and

answering participant questions, I scheduled the final three participant interviews to take place the following week and reminded all participants of the interviews.

### *Module 6 – Individual Personal Interviews*

The sixth week involved the facilitation of individual personal interviews for each participant. All six participants completed their interview during their scheduled time. Four of the six interviews took place during the morning, while two participants requested an evening interview time. Interviews took place in the church café. During the interview, participants were asked the following four questions:

- 1) Prior to the workshop, what was your impression and experience of online fresh expressions?
- 2) How has your understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions changed since participating in this workshop?
- 3) What else do you need to feel adequately trained to lead an online fresh expression?
- 4) Do you think you are more or less likely to lead an online fresh expression after participating in this workshop? Why?

### **Summary of Learnings**

Participant responses to pre and post-workshop questionnaires, in conjunction with response to personal interviews and focused group discussions demonstrated some level of change with regard to embracing digitality and cultivating online fresh expressions. All participants indicated that prior to the workshop, their experience of



online fresh expressions was minimal or none at all. Similarly, all participants indicated a lack of confidence to lead online fresh expressions prior to participating in the project. The following section will sort through the data collected and demonstrate the areas of change, as well as the areas where no change occurred as a result of participation in the project.

### *Participation in Online Fresh Expressions*

All six participants indicated in pre-workshop questionnaires that they were not currently active in online fresh expressions at DFUMC or another location. Four out of six participants indicated in pre-workshop questionnaires that they do not consider themselves to be confident to lead online fresh expressions. The two participants who indicated that they are confident leading an online fresh expression in their pre-workshop questionnaire later indicated during the personal interview that their confidence is based on previous experience with online fresh expressions as well as established relationships with those who would participate.

This data suggests that there is still a gap in the confidence level of participants to engage in cultivating online fresh expressions and that more training may be needed. Individual interviews revealed that four out of the six participants identified lack of self confidence as a deterrent to leading online fresh expressions. It is also interesting to note that three of these four participants self-identified as digital immigrants in both pre and post-workshop questionnaires, suggesting that there may be a greater confidence gap for digital immigrants than there is for digital natives.

### *Digital Immigrant or Digital Native?*

Participant responses to the question, “Do you consider yourself to be a digital native or digital immigrant?” indicated that five of the six participants identified themselves as digital immigrants in the pre-workshop questionnaire. Three participants considered themselves to be digital immigrants in both pre and post-workshop questionnaires. Participant C identified as a digital native in both pre and post-workshop questionnaires. Participants A and D indicated that prior to the workshop, they considered themselves digital immigrants and after the workshop considered themselves to be digital natives. Participant A indicated in their personal interview that their understanding of digitality changed as they participated in the project, leading them to identify as a digital native in the post-workshop questionnaire. Participant D shared that they were not aware of how much they engaged in digital relationships prior to participating in the project, leading to a change in their response to the question in the post-workshop questionnaire.

The table below shows the breakdown of participant responses to this question:

		A	B	C	D	E	F
Pre-Workshop	Do you consider yourself to be a digital native (N) or digital immigrant (I)?	I	I	N	I	I	I
Post-Workshop	Do you consider yourself to be a digital native or digital immigrant?	N	I	N	N	I	I

Table 1 – Digital Native or Digital Immigrant?

This data suggests that there may be a greater number of digital immigrants than digital natives in the local church, but that digital immigrants may be willing to engage in meaningful digital relationships. The data also suggests that there may be a gap of understanding with respect to what constitutes a digital native or digital immigrant, and whether or not one can move from one category to the other.

### *Meaningful Connections in Digital Space*

The pre and post-workshop questionnaires each ask the same question, “Do you think it is possible to experience meaningful connection with others in a digital space? Why or why not?” Five participants responded affirmatively to this question on pre-workshop questionnaires, whereas participant F indicated a response of ‘maybe.’ Similarly, all six participants responded affirmatively in the post-workshop questionnaire to the same question. Below are the responses of participants on the post-workshop questionnaire:

- Participant A – “Yes. Developing relationships and conversation to share the gospel is possible in digital space.”
- Participant B – “Yes. I use my phone to connect with people all the time.”
- Participant C – “Yes. I have personally experienced growth in my relationships in online spaces.”
- Participant D – “I think it is possible to experience meaningful connection with others in a digital space. I joined an online bible study on Facebook and everyday we read and discuss each section of the book we read. I prayed with other women and talked with them as they experienced difficult times.”
- Participant E – “I believe it more today by discussions and examples of how it can work through platforms like Zoom and Facebook.”
- Participant F – “Yes. Through digital connection.”

These responses, combined with previously explored data on digital natives and digital immigrants, suggest that while digital immigrants are less likely to feel confident

cultivating an online fresh expression, they are open to the idea that meaningful connections are possible in digital spaces. These responses are consistent with group conversation held during the theological foundations module in session four.

### *Learnings from Individual Interviews*

Individual interviews provided me with usable data to compare responses with regard to participant experiences and understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions. All six participants responded to the first interview question, “Prior to the workshop, what was your impression and experience of online fresh expressions?” With minor variation in how participants worded their responses, I was able to sort their responses into four categories: No experience, Little experience, Knew it would be important, and First time hearing at workshop.

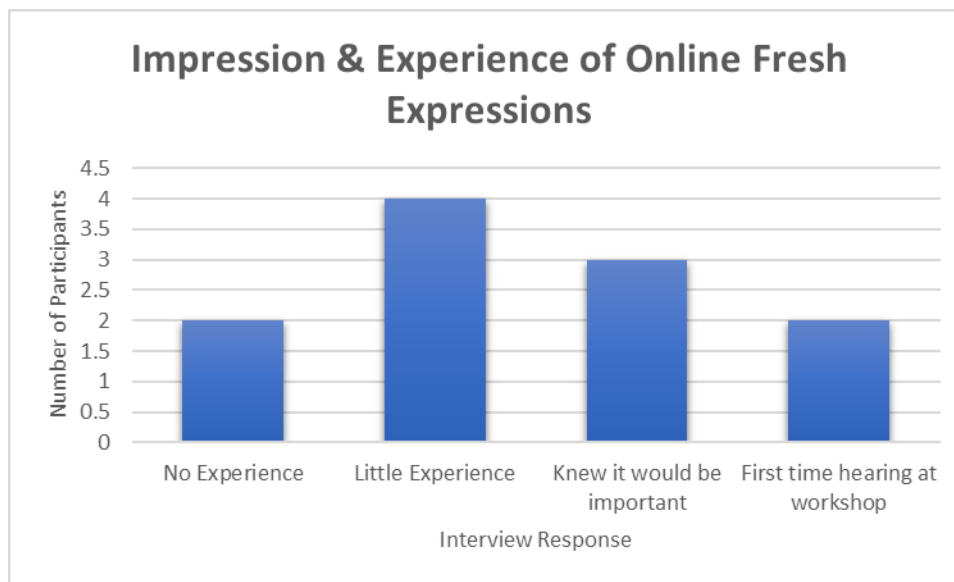


Table 2 – Impression & Experience of Online Fresh Expressions

Participant responses indicated that all six participants had little to no prior experience with online fresh expressions. However, it is notable that three participants indicated that they knew online fresh expressions would be an important subject, even though they may have had only limited experience. It is also notable that only two of the six participants stated that the workshop was their first time hearing about online fresh expressions.

All six participants responded as well to the second individual interview question, “How has your understanding of digitality and online fresh expressions changed since participating in this workshop?” I noticed an emerging pattern as I sorted through the data on this question, especially with respect to the first interview question and the pre and post-workshop questionnaires. The data suggests that while participants do not have much experience with online fresh expressions and a limited knowledge of digitality, they are open to the possibilities that exist in cultivating online fresh expressions. The following table highlights four themes that were evident in participant responses to the second interview question:

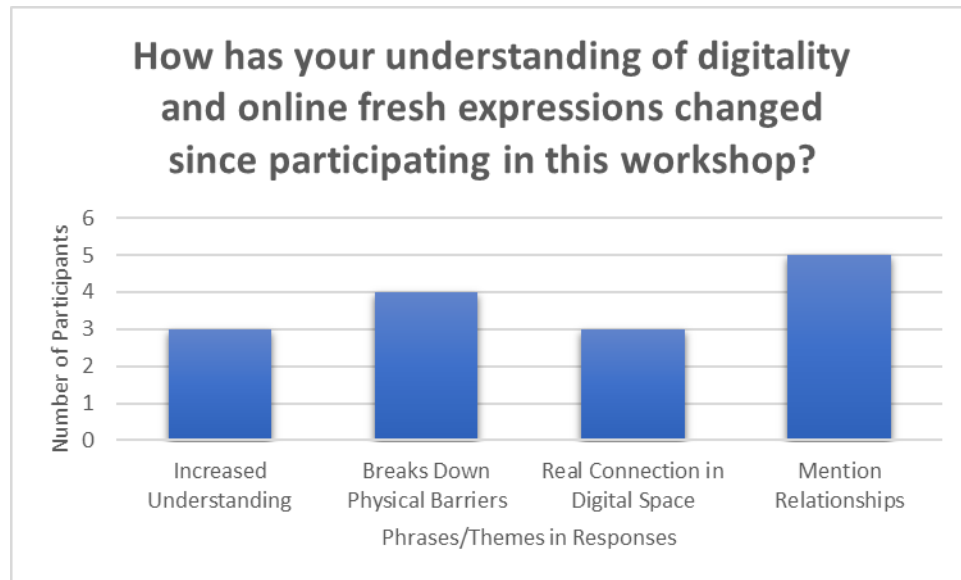


Table 3 – Change in Understanding of Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions

While I anticipated participants to indicate the importance of relationships, I was especially drawn to observing that participants viewed online space as a place where physical barriers are broken down. Additionally, while 50% of participants indicated they experienced an increased understanding of online fresh expressions and digitality, the same 50% indicated the importance of real connection in digital space as a change in their understanding.

Question three on the individual interview sheet asked, “What else do you need to feel adequately trained to lead an online fresh expression?” Taking the open-ended responses of participants and quantifying them through categorization, I was able to identify four themes based on shared phrases across participant responses. These responses are summarized in the following table.

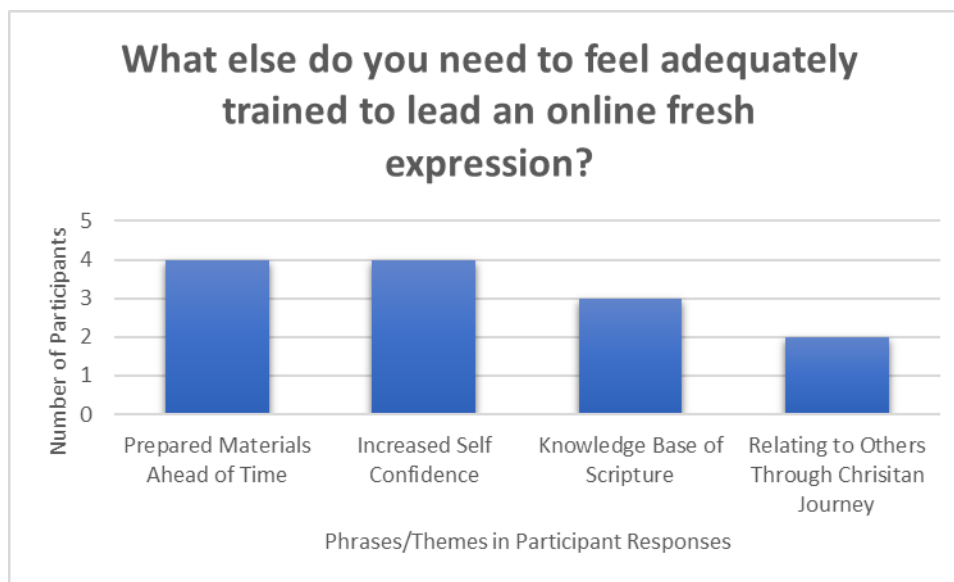


Table 4 – Responses for Adequate Training to Lead Online Fresh Expressions

The data discovered from participant responses to this question indicate that participants view self confidence and access to materials as the most important elements to feeling adequately trained to lead online fresh expressions. It is interesting to observe that an increased knowledge base of Scripture was indicated by 50% of participants. The two participants who indicated they need a better way to relate with others through their Christian journey also indicated that they place a high value on helping people see the connections between faith and life through personal stories. In the pre and post-workshop questionnaires for these two participants, each indicated a high regard for building relationships with people outside the church.

The final individual interview question asked participants directly, “Do you think you are more or less likely to lead an online fresh expression after participating in this workshop? Why?” Participant responses to this question during the individual interview are interesting to observe when compared to responses given to a similar question of

confidence asked in question five of the post-workshop questionnaire. Responses to this question are found in the following table:



Table 5 – Responses to Leading Online Fresh Expressions Post-Workshop

The compiled data indicates that 50% of participants would more than likely lead an online fresh expression after participating in the workshop, while two participants indicated that there is a possibility they would lead an online fresh expression. One participant indicated that their propensity to lead an online fresh expression after participating in the workshop remains about the same as before they became a participant. While viewing this data in comparison to responses given in post-workshop questionnaires with respect to confidence in leading online fresh expressions, it is interesting to observe that four out of six participants indicated they would not feel confident, whereas two indicated they would definitely feel confident to lead online fresh expressions. Given these two sets of data, it seems as though there is a possible gap that exists between confidence and interest when it comes to leading online fresh expressions.



## Conclusion

In the course of the six-week workshop, all participants indicated some level of change with regard to their knowledge of digitality and online fresh expressions. Similarly, participants indicated that they experienced change with respect to their comfort level in leading an online fresh expression. Overall, the data appears to support my hypothesis that If the people of Durand First UMC learn about and embrace digitality, they will be equipped to cultivate online fresh expressions that build meaningful relationships with unchurched people.

While preparing and implementing this project, I experienced several conversations with people that seemed to indicate a strong interest in seeing where my research would lead. Even as I spoke with people who were unable to participate directly in the workshops, I observed that there is a palpable need within the local church for training and experience with online fresh expressions. Preparing the PowerPoint slides and handouts for my participants proved to be a helpful experience for me and for the people of Durand First UMC. Holding the workshops in the church café provided an opportunity for participants to sit comfortably while engaged in each session.

One of the challenges in implementing this project had more to do with timing than anything. Trying to recruit people for a workshop in early August is challenging, especially when the weather is still favorable for being outdoors. It may be more advantageous to hold this workshop in the winter months or at times that don't compete with vacations or other times when people from the church are otherwise out of town. This is especially true if the church is smaller and there is a limited pool of people to choose from.

One area of change that I would implement in the future is with regard to the use of technology. It seemed odd to me that throughout the project on digitality and online fresh expressions that I didn't open the participant pool to people who could join via online means. While I did make Zoom available for registered participants to utilize if they fell ill, I did not think to create space where people could choose to join via online means. Something that I think worked well was offering the handouts week by week rather than all at once at the beginning. This seems to have kept participants interested in the current module and provided an incentive for them to return the following week.

Overall, participants indicated that they were thankful to participate in the project. One participant stated, "I never thought that church could exist online." Referencing the theological foundation module, another participant stated, "I knew relationships were important, but I never thought about how those relationships could extend to the online world." One of the participants does not have a computer, has limited internet experience, and is a self-described digital immigrant. However, this participant indicated a growing interest in observing the future of ministry in online space. Since the conclusion of my project, I have experienced several conversations with this participant on the subject of digitality and online fresh expressions.

For future research, I anticipate that churches who desire to reach people outside the walls will want to educate and empower their people to engage in meaningful ministry in online space. The challenge is that many smaller churches believe they don't have the funds, personnel, or structure (lack of high-speed internet service, older technology, etc.) to engage in online fresh expressions. It is my hope that a future researcher looks at this project as a stepping stone toward a bigger picture of equipping

the local church to engage in ministry across the globe through online fresh expressions as people build relationships in meaningful ways. It is possible that research into rural congregations, combined with research on fresh expressions and digitality could merge to form opportunities for smaller, rural churches to experience the joy of reaching into the digital frontier with the hope of the gospel.

**APPENDIX A**  
**WORKSHOP SLIDES**

### Digitality and Online Fresh Expressions

- We are the most connected generation of humanity in world history
  - *"More and more, we find ourselves absorbed in electronic conversations with people we aren't physically with. Sometimes we are a world apart. Digital technology has made the world smaller – and people more accessible- but it has also cast a deafening silence between people sitting next to each other."*
    - Brad Smith, President and chief legal officer at Microsoft, author of *Tools and Weapons: The Promise and Peril of the Digital Age*

1



Welcome to  
Digitality

The new missional frontier created by digitization offers the local church an opportunity to share the gospel and form new Christian communities.

4



2



Ministry On The  
Digital Frontier

WEEK 2

Biblical Foundations

Equipping the Local Church  
to Embrace Online Fresh

5



3

THE CONTEXT SETS THE AGENDA

- The work of Re-Missioning
  - Dr. Michael Beck describes the work of Re-Missioning as "...awakening and practically focusing the efforts of the congregation on the Great Commission locally." (Beck, *Deep Roots Wild Branches*, 6)
  - Inherited (traditional/existing) churches are revitalized by engaging in Fresh Expressions through the blended ecology (blended ecology refers to the relationship between the inherited church and fresh expressions of church that create a new, interconnected creation)
  - Remember, a Fresh Expression is "a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church." (Beck, *Deep Roots Wild Branches*, 11)



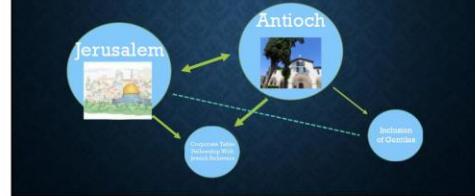
6

### ACTS 11:19-30

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. 20 But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. 21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." 27 At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. 29 The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; 30 this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

7

### THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM AND ANTIOCH



10

### THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ACTS

THE MISSIONAL FOCUS OF ACTS, AS WITNESSED THROUGH THE INCLUSION OF GENTILES, POINTS TO GOD'S WORK IN PREPARING THE CHURCH TO EXPAND AND DEVELOP WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE AND FORMATION OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

8

### THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ANTIOCH

- I. Spread of the gospel (11:19-21)
  - a. The gospel is proclaimed only to Jews (11:19)
  - b. The gospel is proclaimed to Gentiles (11:20-21)
- II. Barnabas sent to Antioch from Jerusalem (11:22-24)
- III. Saul brought to Antioch (11:25-26)
  - a. Barnabas travels to Tarsus to locate Saul (11:25)
  - b. Believers in Antioch are given the title - "Christians" (11:26)
- IV. Antiochian Christians respond to famine in Judea (11:27-30)

11

### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 1

Based on what we just read, in what ways is the Christian community formed in Antioch?

9

### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 2

- The church at Jerusalem, as the inherited church exists alongside and supports the expansion of the mission through Antioch. In what ways is Antioch an image of cultivating fresh expressions today?

12

### "SOME MEN OF CYPRUS AND CYRENE" ACTS 11:19-21

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. 20 But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. 21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord.

13

### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 3

- The mission of the early church expands geographically beyond Jerusalem, but also expands culturally to include gentiles. How is this similar to the 21st century church expanding beyond its walls to reach people in digital spaces?

16



14

"While the church in Antioch looked radically different from the church in Jerusalem, the mission was able to expand as each church grew in relationship with one another. Emphasizing this mutually beneficial relationship means understanding the importance of the traditional, or inherited church (Jerusalem) in relationship with the innovating or emerging church (Antioch) as foundational to the Christian mission today."



17

### MAKING SPACE

- "The key question for the Jerusalem followers of Jesus, as for many in the inherited church now, was how to make space for believers with a very different sense of spiritual identity."
- (Dr. Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 8)

15

### MISSION 'GO'

- "Ancient Israel saw its missional task as being to attract the nations, whereas the first Christians went in mission to the nations."
- (Dr. Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 4)

18

#### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 4

- The people in Antioch speak many different languages, yet the church gains traction in the midst of this diversity. In what ways is this similar to the church of today learning a new “language” to connect with people in digital spaces?

19

#### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 6

- If Antioch can be compared to the digital frontier, how is Durand First UMC prepared to enter into that space?

22

#### GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION 5

- God's presence and action prepares the church in Jerusalem to spread into Antioch and beyond, engaging with culture and forming Christian community. In what ways is Durand First UMC like Jerusalem? Like Antioch?

20



23

#### ANTIOCH AND THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

- The scattering of believers in the time of Acts was primarily driven by persecution.
- Scattering of believers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is primarily driven by technology



21

## Ministry On The Digital Frontier

### Week 3

Historical Foundations

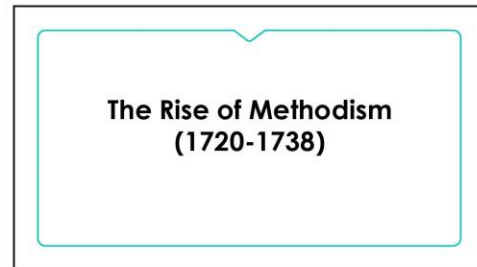
Equipping the Local Church to Embrace Online Fresh

24

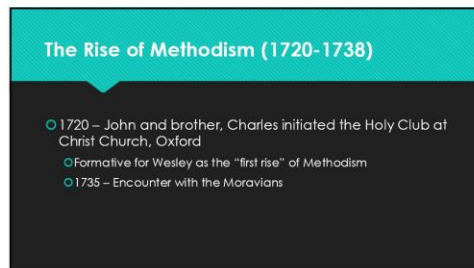




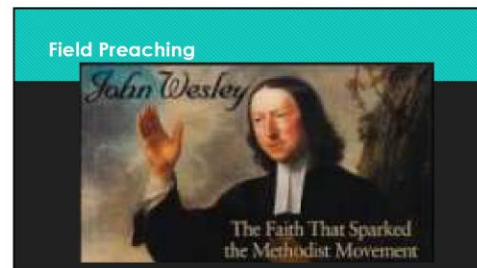
25



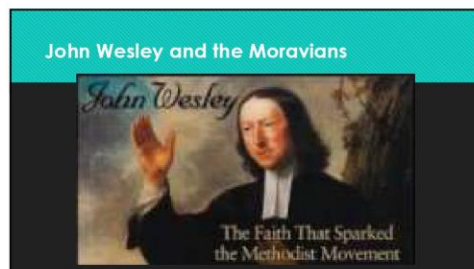
28



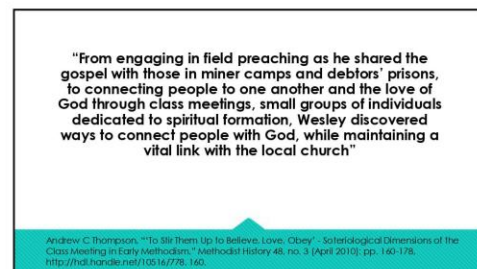
26



29



27



30

### Online Fresh Expressions and the Methodist Movement

"Pioneering approaches to ministry on the digital frontier requires churches to embrace ministry through incarnational processes that prioritize relationships and build meaningful connections with those outside the walls of the traditional structure of the church."

– Rev. Aaron Kesson

31

### LEVELS OF CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM WORLD

#### Un-churched

- People who have generally never been to church, except for funerals and weddings
- Limited to no church involvement

#### De-churched

- People who, at one point were part of a church
- May have had negative experiences of church
- May have become disinterested in church

34

## Ministry On The Digital Frontier

Week 4 - Theological Foundation

Equipping the Local Church to Embrace Online Fresh Expressions

32

### RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

"Combined with a general aversion to embracing emerging methods and technologies for reaching unchurched people with the gospel, the local church misses out on opportunities to develop and foster meaningful relationships with the unchurched and de-churched."

The terms 'unchurched' and 'de-churched' are terms used to describe levels of church involvement. 'Unchurched' are people who have never been to church, except for funerals or weddings. 'De-churched' is used to describe people who, at one point were part of a church. For more on this, see Church House Publishing, Mission Shaped Church (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2006), 37.

35



### LANDSCAPE FOR MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

33

### LESSLIE NEWBIGIN (1909-1998)

- Devoted to exploring the intersection of faith and life
- A "practical theologian", challenging pastors and theologians to think outside theological labels and ecclesiastical boundaries
- Theology in the context of where the people are (highly contextual)
- "I can make no claim to either originality or to scholarship. I am a pastor and a preacher." Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989)
- Newbigin's contributions enable pastors and church leaders to re-envision ministry in a post-Christendom era

36





## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahlstrand, Kajsa, J. Andrew Kirk, Tania Petrova, Teresa Francesca Rossi, and J. Jayakiran Sebastian. *Mission and Postmodernities*. Edited by Olsen Rolv. Oxford, UK: 1517 Media, 2011. doi:10.2307/j.ctv1ddcqzn.
- Albin, Thomas R. *Experience of God, The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Edited by James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham. London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Allen, Ronald J. *Acts of the Apostles*. Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries. JSTOR. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013. <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/j.ctt22h6sgm>.
- Ampuja, Marko. *Theorizing Globalization : A Critique of the Mediatization of Social Theory*, BRILL, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=999467>.
- Atkins, Martyn. *Resourcing Renewal: Shaping Churches for the Emerging Future*. London: Epworth, 2010.
- Avis, Paul D. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Barna, George. *Turnaround Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993.
- Beaumont, Susan. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.
- Beck, Michael Adam and Jorge Acevedo. *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2020.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Deep Roots Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2019.
- Beck, Michael and Tyler Kleeberger, *Fresh Expressions of the Rural Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2022.
- Bence, Philip A. *Acts: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998.

- Boff, Leonardo. *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986. <https://search-ebscohost-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1761177&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Bolsinger, Tod E. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Brandt, Anthony K., and David Eagleman. *The Runaway Species: How Human Creativity Remakes the World*. New York, NY: Catapult, 2017.
- Brown, Raymond E. "The Acts of the Apostles." In *An Introduction to the New Testament*, edited by Marion L. Soards, 98-115. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvggx32v>.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society* (version New ed.). The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, V. 1. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444319514>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'Centrality in the Space of Flows'." *Built Environment* (1978-) 33, no.4 (2007): 482-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23289821>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society." *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 238-266.
- Cavanagh, Allison. *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, McGraw-Hill Education, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=316259>.
- Chilcote, Paul W. *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Clayton, M. Christensen, Michael E. Raynor and Rory McDonald. "What Is Disruptive Innovation?" *Harvard Business Review*. December 2015. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-is-disruptive-innovation>.
- Collins, Kenneth J. *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Method of John Wesley's Practical Theology Reconsidered." *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 9. No. 2, 2017. 101-122. <https://doi.org/10.5325/weslmethstud.9.2.0101>

- Collins, Travis. *From the Steeple to the Street: Innovating Mission and Ministry Through Fresh Expressions of Church*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2016.
- Dean, Kenda C. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Denning, Peter J., and Robert Dunham. *The Innovator's Way: Essential Practices for Successful Innovation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.
- Downey, Glanville. *History of Antioch*. Princeton, New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q11z>.
- Dunn, James D. G.. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988.
- Experian Marketing Services. *Mosaic USA Group and Segment Descriptions*. Version 2, 2013.
- Farr, Bob, Doug Anderson and Kay Kotan. *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Fosner, Verlon. *Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Dinner Church Handbook: A Step-By-Step Recipe for Reaching Neighborhoods*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Welcome to Dinner, Church*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017.
- Frost, Michael, and Alan Hirsch. *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church*. Peabody, MA. Sydney, AU: Hendrickson Publishers Strand Pub, 2009.
- Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003. <https://www-ministrymatters-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/reader/9781426750182/#title.html>.
- Goheen, Michael W. A Missional Approach to Scripture for the Theological Task. *The End of Theology: Shaping Theology for the Sake of Mission*. London, UK: 1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2016.

- Goldstein, Jonathan A. "Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism." *Semites, Iranians, Greeks, and Romans: Studies in their Interactions*. Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, Brown University, 2020. 3-32.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzpv55g.5>.
- González, Justo L. *Acts : The Gospel of the Spirit*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1761268&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Harford, Tim. *Messy: The Power of Disorder to Transform Our Lives*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2016.
- Harnish, James A. *You Only Have to Die: Leading Your Congregation to New Life*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Hengel, Martin, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, translated by John Bowden. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003.
- Holladay, Carl R. *Acts : A Commentary*. First ed. The New Testament Library. EBSCOhost. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.
- Hammond, Geordan. "John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity." *Oxford Scholarship Online*. London, UK: Oxford Press, 2014. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198701606.001.0001.
- Hardt, Philip F. "The Evangelistic and Catechetical Role of the Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism." *Methodist History* 38, no. 1 (October 1999).  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10516/6487>.
- Heitzenrater, Richard P. "The Second Rise of Methodism: Georgia." *Methodist History* 28, no. 3 (January 1990).
- Hiebert, Paul G. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Hirsch, Alan, and Dave Ferguson. *On the Verge : A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Hirsch, Alan, Tim Catchim, and Mike Breen. *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.



\_\_\_\_\_. *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ*. USA: 100M, 2017.

Hollinghurst, Steve. *Mission-shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2010.

Hunsberger, George R. "Biography as Missiology: The Case of Lesslie Newbigin." *Missiology: An International Review* 27, no. 4 (October, 1999): 523-31.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America." *Missiology: An International Review* 19, no. 4 (October, 1991): 391-408.

Hunter, George G. *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West—Again*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010.

Hutchison, R. (2010). Spaces of flows. In *Encyclopedia of urban studies* (Vol. 1, pp. 760-761). SAGE Publications, Inc.,  
<https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781412971973.n269>

Jackson, Jack. *Offering Christ: John Wesley's Evangelistic Vision*. Nashville, TN: Kingsood, 2017.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Collecting and Preserving Disciples: Verbal Proclamation in Early Methodist Evangelism." *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 2 (2010).

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina: the Acts of the Apostles*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Jones, L G. *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016.

Kandiah, Krish. "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to a Theology of Evangelism." *Transformation* 24, no. 1 (January, 2007): 51-60.

Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Volume 2, 3:1-14:28. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. <https://ebookcentral-proquest.com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=3117405>.

Kistemaker, Simon J., and William Hendriksen. *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*. Vol. 17. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953–2001.

Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012.

- Longenecker, Bruce W. "Lukan Aversion to Humps and Hollows: The Case of Acts 11.27-12.25." *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 2 (2004). 185-204.  
DOI:10.1017/S0028688504000128.
- Maddox, Randy L. "Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons From North American Methodism." *The Asbury Theological Journal* 51, No. 1. (Spring 1996).
- Male, David. *Pioneers 4 Life: Explorations in Theology and Wisdom for Pioneering Leaders*. Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Do We Need Pioneers" 2017. <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-started/pioneer-ministry/>
- McRay, John. "Antioch." Edited by David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Metzger, Bruce Manning, United Bible Societies. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)*. London, UK; New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1994.
- Mikoski, Gordon. "Traditioned Innovation." *Theology Today* 68, no. 2 (2011): 113-115.  
DOI: 10.1177/0040573611405884.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Moynagh, Michael. *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens*. Oxford, England, UK Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Monarch Books, 2014.
- Moynagh, Michael and Philip Harrold. *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*. London, UK: SCM Press, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship*. London, UK: SCM Press, 2017.
- Moynagh, Michael, and Richard Worsley. *Going Global: Key Questions for the Twenty-first Century*. London, UK: A & C Black, 2008.
- Negroponte, Nicholas. *Being Digital*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2015.

- Newbiggin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.  
<https://thetdl.on.worldcat.org/v2/oclc/870136328>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.
- Nouwen, Henri J. *The Wounded Healer*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1972.
- Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York Berkeley, CA: Marlowe Distributed by Publishers Group West, 1999.
- Pervo, Richard I. "The Church Spreads to Antioch." *Acts: A Commentary*, edited by Harold W. Attridge. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2009.  
 doi:10.2307/j.ctvb6v8c6.33.
- Peterson, Cheryl M. Ecclesiology Post-Christendom: The Missional Church. *Who Is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media: Fortress Press. 2013.
- Picardo, Rosario and Jason Moore. *From Franchise to Local Dive: Multiplying Your Church by Discovering Your Contextual Flavor* Nashville, TN: Market Square Publishing, 2020.
- Prensky, Marc. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001): 1-6. <https://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>.
- Russell, Brian D. *(Re)Aligning with God: Reading Scripture for Church and World*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015.
- Samuel, Simon. "'Certain Men' of Cyprus and Cyrene in Acts: Diaspora Missionaries of the Early Christianity." In *Diaspora Christianities: Global Scattering and Gathering of South Asian Christians*, edited by George Sam, by Walls Andrew F., 29-43. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2018. doi:10.2307/j.ctv47w3nj.7.
- Sexton, Jason S., and Paul Weston, eds. *The End of Theology: Shaping Theology for the Sake of Mission*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2016. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1c84fvr.

- Shauf, Scott. *The Divine in Acts and in Ancient Historiography*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9m0sdz>.
- Stalder, Felix. *The Digital Condition*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018.
- Stults, Donald Le Roy. Putting Newbigin in Perspective. *Grasping Truth and Reality: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Mission to the Western World*. London, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2009.
- Sunquist, Scott W. The Legacy of Newbigin for Mission to the West. *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Missiological Engagements)*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Taylor, Nicholas. *Paul, Antioch, and Jerusalem : A Study in Relationships and Authority in Earliest Christianity*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series, 66. Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1992. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474213943.ch-004>.
- The General Council on Finance and Administration for The United Methodist Church. *Membership and Attendance Durand First UMC*. UMDData. <http://www.umddata.org/ChurchProfile.aspx?ChurchID=583845>
- Thompson, Andrew C. "The Practical Theology of the General Rules," *The Asbury Journal*. 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'To Stir Them Up to Believe, Love, Obey' - Soteriological Dimensions of the Class Meeting in Early Methodism." *Methodist History* 48, no. 3 (April 2010). <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/778>.
- US Census Bureau. *Quick Facts: Genesee County, Michigan*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/geneseecountymichigan,MI/PST045>
- Ward, Pete. *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church*. Leiden, NL; Boston, MA: Brill, 2017.
- Warschauer, Mark. *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.
- Watson, David Lowes. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985.
- Watson, Kevin.M. *Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification – The Lost Power of the Methodist Movement*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2021.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014.
- Wesley, John. *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley: Journal and Diaries II (1738-43)*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Hartzenrater. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley: Journal and Diaries IV (1755-1765)*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Hartzenrater. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Journal of John Wesley*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1951.  
<https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal/journal.vi.iii.i.html>
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* London, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1831.
- White, Charles Edward. "John Wesley's Use of Church Discipline." *Methodist History* 29, no. 2 (January 1991). <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/5737>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Decline of the Class Meeting." *Methodist History* 38, no. 4 (July 2000).  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10516/6479>.
- Wigger, John. "John Wesley and Francis Asbury." *Perfecting Perfection: Essays in Honour of Henry D. Rack*, ed. Robert Webster. Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2015.
- Williams, Rowan. *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Edited by David Marshall. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32b68d>.
- Witherington, Ben, III. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998.
- Zetterholm, Magnus. *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity*. Routledge Early Church Monographs. London, UK: Routledge, 2003. <https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780203449493>